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Ex-DMK leader arrested for ₹2,000 cr drug trafficking

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'India saved consumers from price rise'

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India triumph in Test series 4-1: Ashwin shines in 100th Test

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساہ روزنامہ بنگلور

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PHOTO: PTI

PM opens twin-lane tunnel near LAC

It will connect Tezpur to Tawang, a potential flashpoint in India-China border dispute

GUWAHATI, 9 MARCH

The world's longest twin-lane Sela tunnel, at an elevation of 13,000 ft in Arunachal Pradesh, was dedicated to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday.

The tunnel, constructed at a cost of Rs 825 crore by the Border Roads Organisation, is strategically crucial as it is close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) near China, a BRO official said.

The project was necessitated as the Balipara-Chariduar-Tawang road often remains closed due to snow and landslides caused by heavy rainfall in the area.

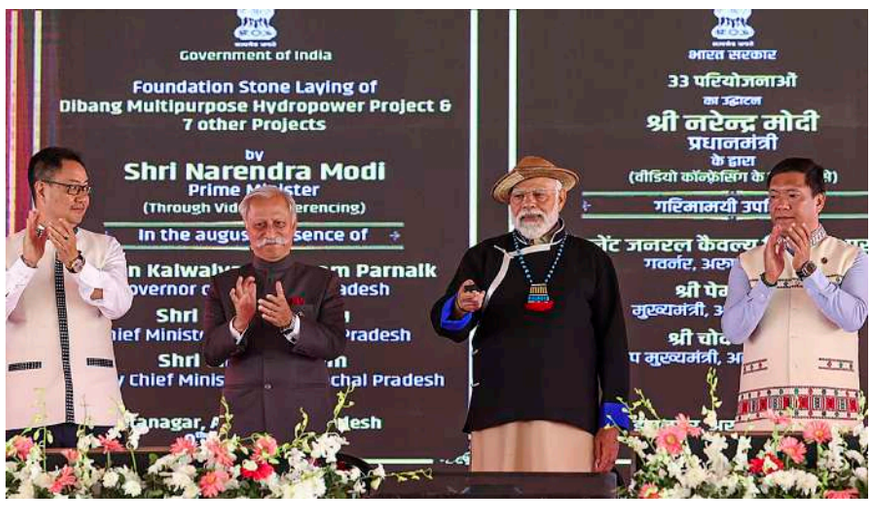
The project provides all-weather connectivity to the Tawang region — the part contested by China which describes it as a part of the ancient territory. Until now, the Sela Pass stays closed for a few winter months. But the project will provide a new alignment on the axis towards the LAC ensuring seamless movement for military personnel and equipment throughout the year.

The project is also aimed at enhancing the Army's capabilities at the LAC and will ensure speedy deployment of troops, weapons and machinery to the forward areas along the Indo-China border, the BRO official said.

The project comprises two tunnels, with the first one being a single-tube tunnel of 1,003 metres in length and the second being 1,595m-long, with an escape tube for emergencies. It has 8.6 km-long approach and link roads.

The escape tube, constructed parallel to the main one, is connected with cross passages every 500 m, the BRO official said.

Earlier the route to Sela Pass had only a single-lane connectivity and treacherous bends due to which heavy vehicles and container trucks could not go to Tawang, the BRO official said. The Sela tunnel has been constructed using the New Austrian Tunneling Method (NATM).



Narendra Modi during inauguration and foundation stone laying of multiple development projects during the 'Viksit Bharat Viksit North East' programme, in Itanagar, on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

'India's moves not conducive to peace'

Meanwhile, in a stern reply to India amid the diplomatic standoff between the two nations, China has said that deploying more troops at the border would not ease tensions. It said that it is committed to upholding peace and tranquility in the border areas.

While addressing a regular press briefing on Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said, "India's move of strengthening military deployment along the border with China is counterproductive to the two countries' efforts to ease the situation at the border and not conducive to safeguarding peace and tranquility of the border areas."

Beijing's reply came in response to Bloomberg's question on the latest reports that state India has stationed 10,000 new troops along the border with China.

Mao Ning said, "China is always committed to upholding peace and tranquility in the border areas."

India and China have been locked in a military stand-off for nearly four years after the confrontations at friction points in eastern Ladakh in 2020. — *PTI/ ANI*

The Prime Minister inaugurated Sela tunnel, which will provide all-weather connectivity, overcoming snowfall and landslides on Balipara-Chariduar-Tawang Road. This comes amid ongoing tension with China.

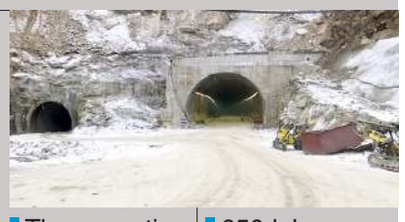
- It is the world's longest bi-lane tunnel
- **13,000**ft Situated above
- **₹825**cr Cost
- Connects Tezpur to Tawang, near LAC with China
- Can handle 3,000 cars & 2,000 trucks per day
- Can accommodate all military vehicles
- It has 2 tunnels and a link road

Construction

- Duration: 5 years

Materials used

- **71,000**ft metric tonnes cement
- **5,000**ft metric tonnes steel



- The execution took 90 lakh man hours
- 650 labourers worked on it

IAF airlifts 700 stranded passengers in J&K

JAMMU, 9 MARCH

The Indian Air Force (IAF) airlifted over 700 stranded passengers between the twin union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh on Saturday, an official said. While 514 passengers were airlifted from Jammu to Leh in two sorties of IL-76, 223 people were flown from Srinagar to Leh in another sortie, the official said. With this, a total of 1,251 people were airlifted between Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh this week. Earlier on Monday, 331 passengers were airlifted in separate sorties of AN-32, also known as Kargil courier, by the IAF between Jammu and Kashmir to Kargil. *—PTI*

4 hurt as fire engulfs garage in Basaveshwaranagar

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

A fire ripped through a garage in Bangalore's Basaveshwaranagar injuring four people and damaging nearby property on Saturday evening. Garage owner George and worker Shiva were among those hurt. According to police, the fire broke out around 5.30pm. The force of the explosion caused damage to a two-story house next door. A Swift Desire car and a two-wheeler were also destroyed. The fire is suspected to have started due to welding a gas tank. The blast shattered windows in nearby houses, highlighting the potential dangers of improper welding practices. *—Salar News*

Vaishnaw launches India's fastest router in B'luru

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

In a significant stride towards technological independence and innovation, Union Minister for Communications, Electronics and Information Technology and Railways, Ashwini Vaishnaw launched India's fastest and indigenously designed IP/MPLS (Multiprotocol Label Switching) router in Bengaluru on Saturday. MPLS is a routing technique in telecommunications networks that directs data from one node to the next, based on labels rather than network addresses. The project is spearheaded by government's Department of Telecom, CDOT, and Nivetti. *—ANI*

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BJP, Jana Sena, TDP finalise seat-sharing

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

BJP sealed its alliance with Telugu Desam Party (TDP) on Saturday for the upcoming Lok Sabha and Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections, with former chief minister of the southern state N Chandrababu Naidu asserting that the combine will sweep the polls.

The alliance was formalised after the two parties and actor Pawan Kalyan-led Jana Sena Party (JSP) held another round of talks involving Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP Chief JP Nadda, besides Naidu and Kalyan.

A joint statement issued by the three parties said under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "dynamic and visionary" leadership, they have decided to contest the Lok Sabha and Andhra Pradesh Assembly polls together as they are committed to ensuring the country's progress and an uplift of the state and its people.

The seat-sharing modalities for the 25 Lok Sabha and 175 Assembly seats in the state would be deliberated in a day or two, the statement said.

TDP Chief N Chandrababu Naidu met Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

Naidu told a group of reporters after the finalisation of the alliance talks that Andhra Pradesh and its brand have been "destroyed" by the state's ruling YSR Congress Party as he lashed out at Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy for "pushing the state backward" while the country is progressing. *—PTI*

Kamal Haasan's MNM joins DMK-led alliance in TN

Chennai, 9 March

Six years after its founding and fighting two elections by itself, actor Kamal Haasan's Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) on Saturday joined the ruling DMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu and extended its support to the bloc for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. Amid speculations that Haasan's party might be allotted seats to contest the Parliamentary polls, DMK gave MNM one seat for the 2025 Rajya Sabha polls. —PTI

DMK GIVES 10 SEATS TO CONG FOR TN, PONDY

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

With the Lok Sabha election schedule likely to be announced soon, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, has sealed a seat-sharing pact with Congress (both allies of INDIA bloc) which will contest on nine seats, setting aside 21 seats for the ruling DMK.

DMK has so far finalised seat-sharing deals with allies CPI (M), CPI, IUML, and KMDK, besides MDMK and VCK.

MDMK, IUML, and KMDK (DMK Symbol) each get one seat while VCK, CPM, and CPI get two seats each in the Lok Sabha polls. Congress will contest the lone seat in Puducherry.

Earlier in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, DMK-led alliance secured a landslide victory by bagging 38 out of 39 seats. Congress, which was also a part of the alliance, bagged 8 seats out of the nine contested. *—ANI*

PUMPS ONLY 1.4K MLD

BWSSB can meet only half of City's daily water needs

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

As Bengaluru is dealing with a severe water crisis the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) chairman Ram Prasath Manohar on Saturday said that though the City residents need 2,100 MLD water, the BWSSB can pump only 1,450 MLD water.

"2,100 MLD water is required for Bengaluru City residents, but 1,450 MLD is being pumped. The work of providing water to additional 110 villages is also going on," Manohar told reporters.

He said that the BWSSB was pumping additional water from the reservoir to Bengaluru to meet the increase in demand.

"Our groundwater level has declined drastically. The apartment dwellers were earlier dependent on bore well water. Now they are dependent on the water board. Cauvery River water is coming to 100KM away from Bengaluru. We will ensure that Bengaluru does not have a drinking water problem," he said.

He also said that the water tankers must register with BBMP by 15 March.

Speaking to reporters at his Sadashivanagar residence, he said, "The Opposition parties don't seem to know anything other than criticism. If they give any constructive suggestions, we are certainly open to considering them. For the first time in the history of the State, we have taken on the water mafia by taking over private water tankers".

"About 50pc of the borewells in the City have dried up. We have decided to take over thousands of private water tankers to supply water for water sources outside the City. We have left the pricing to officials as factors like distance travelled determine costs. Unused milk tankers will be used to ferry water," he added. *—ANI*

BWSSB was pumping additional water from the reservoir to Bengaluru to meet the increase in demand PHOTO: PTI

- BWSSB has banned usage of potable water for non-essential purposes and those found violating the prohibitory order would be fined Rs 5,000.

SINCE 2018

India among 'worst autocracies' in world: Report

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

India has been one of the "worst autocracies" in the world in recent years, said Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy Institute in a report released on Thursday.

The report "Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot," says India has remained an "electoral autocracy" at the end of 2023 after first being categorised as one in 2018. India ranks 104 of the 179 countries and is situated between Niger (better) and Ivory Coast.

The report observes that a "wave of autocratisation is observable globally. It says autocratisation is ongoing in "42 countries, home to 2.8 billion people, or 35per cent of the world's population. India, with 18 per cent of the world's population, accounts for about half of the population living in autocratising countries."

India ranks 104 of the 179 countries and is situated between Niger (better) and Ivory Coast PHOTO: PIXABAY

The report defines an electoral autocracy as one in which multiparty elections for the executive exist but there are "insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, and free and fair elections."

"Over the years, India's autocratisation process has been well documented, including deterioration of freedom of expression, compromising independence of the media, crackdowns on social media, harassments of journalists critical of the government, as well as attacks on civil society and intimidation of the opposition," read the report.

The report added, "The ruling anti-pluralist, Hindu-nationalist BJP with Prime Minister Modi at the helm has for example used laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to silence critics. BJP government undermined the constitution's commitment to secularism by amending the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in 2019."

The V-Dem report said that the Indian government also continued to suppress the freedom of religion. "Intimidation of political opponents and people protesting government policies, as well as silencing of dissent in academia are now prevalent," it added.

The Hindu nationalist government in India has used laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to silence critics, the report pointed out. The report claims El Salvador, India and Mauritius are the worst government offenders when it comes to increasing their efforts to censor the media. *—Salar News*

Goel resigns as EC head ahead of polls

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, Election Commissioner Arun Goel on Saturday resigned from the post.

His resignation has been accepted by the President.

According to a law ministry notification, Goel's resignation has been accepted by President Droupadi Murmu with effect from Saturday. It was not immediately known why he stepped down.

Meanwhile, the election dates are likely to be announced next week.

Arun Goel PHOTO: PTI

Goel, a retired bureaucrat, was a 1985-batch IAS officer of the Punjab cadre. He had joined the Election Commission in November 2022. His tenure was till December 2027.He has also worked as Secretary, Ministry of Culture; Vice-Chairman, Delhi Development Authority; Additional Secretary and Financial Advisor, Ministry of Labour and Employment; Joint Secretary, Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance.

The Lok Sabha polls are slated to be held in April-May this year.

Following the retirement of Anup Pandey in February and Goel's resignation, the three-member EC panel has now only Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar. *—ANI*

PHOTO: SALAR

Ex-corporator's brother hacked to death

MYSURU, 9 MARCH

The brother of a former corporator was hacked to death at Rajiv Nagar in Mysuru on Friday. Maulana Hafil Akmal, brother of former corporator Ayaz Pandu, was travelling on a scooter when he was intercepted by unidentified assailants and attacked with weapons. The motive behind the attack remains unclear. A flex installed to welcome newly elected State Minority Commission President Mohammed Altaf has allegedly resulted in a clash with two groups in the region, leading to the murder.

—Salar News

Karnataka Police marathon to be held today

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

State Bank of India (SBI) is partnering with Karnataka Police Department for a 5km and 10km marathon on Sunday to raise awareness about the dangers of drugs and narcotics. This event coincides with the 50th Golden Jubilee celebration of the State Police Department. The run will begin at 6am near the footsteps of Vidhana Soudha and proceed via KR Circle, Nrupathunga Road, Kasturba Road, Siddalingaiah Circle, Queens Statue Circle, CTO Junction and Police Thimmaiah Circle. The 10km runners will then complete a second loop of the same route. Traffic restrictions will be implemented from 6am to 11:30am on Sunday. Vehicles travelling towards Vidhana Soudha from KR Circle will be diverted towards Police Corner. Vehicles approaching Vidhana Soudha from Balekundri Circle will be diverted at Patta Junction towards Raj Bhavan and Chalukya Road.

—Salar News

Wild elephant enters residential locality in Kodagu

KODAGU, 9 MARCH

A wild elephant entered Kodagu district on Saturday morning triggering panic among local residents. A video of the baby tusker entering Ponnampet captured by locals has been shared on social media platforms. The elephant, which made its way through Kunda Road, Paddy Field, APCMS garden and the main road, was also seen going back the same way that it had entered. Elephants are usually found in the coffee plantations of the nearby forest The Forest Department personnel guided the elephant back to its natural habitat. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Kerala there were several incidents where elephants have ventured into residential areas. On 17 February, a 50-year-old in Wayanad was killed in an attack by wild elephants.

—ANI

Former MLA and Congress leader Vasu dead

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Former MLA and Congress leader Vasu passed away on Saturday morning after a prolonged illness. The former mayor of Mysuru excelled as an industrialist and was the founder of Vidya Vikas Educational Institution. Vasu served as the political secretary to former chief minister Veerappa Moily. He was elected as MLA from Chamaraja Assembly constituency in 2013. His notable contributions were the renovation of Maharani Colleges and overseeing the construction of the new Maharani Commerce and Management College building, Jayadeva Hospital, and a trauma centre. His son Kavish Gonna chose a different path and joined Bharatiya Janata Party contesting from Chamundeshwari Assembly constituency. *—PTI*

Parties gear up with campaign ammunition for LS polls

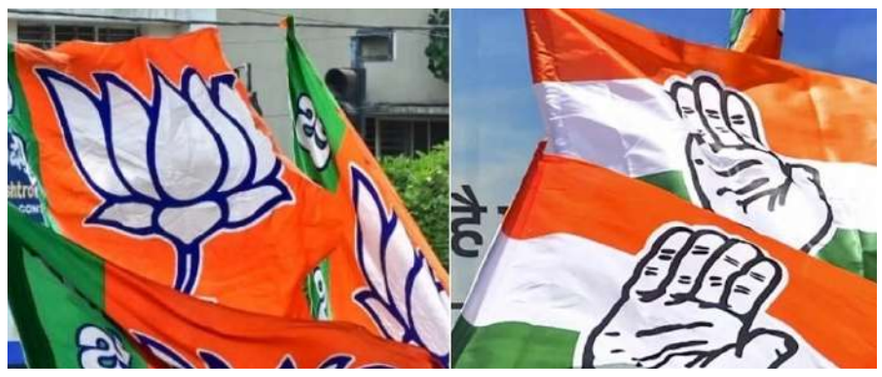
Cong will rely on guarantee, attack NDA over step-motherly attitude

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Even as the ruling Congress and the Opposition BJP are yet to come out with their full list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in Karnataka, there is a fair idea about the campaign issues in their armoury.

The recent bomb blast at Rameswaram Café here and the raising of "pro-Pakistan" slogans in the corridors of Vidhana Soudha have given fresh ammunition to BJP to attack the Congress government. "The twin issues have given us a momentum of sorts in campaigning," a senior BJP leader said. Congress would seek to ride on the popularity of its "guarantee schemes" and make BJP-led NDA government's "step-motherly" attitude towards the State a major poll plank, party sources said.

Political analysts said water scarcity in many parts of the State is also likely to emerge as a key campaign talking point with Congress and BJP bound to indulge in trading blame. Congress on 8 March released its first list of seven candidates for the Lok Sabha polls in the State. BJP-JD(S) combine is yet to come out with its list of nominees. For BJP, which lost the Assembly elections in May last year, Karnataka is the most important as it is the only State in the south where it had held power.



The recent bomb blast at Rameswaram Cafe and pro-Pakistan slogans in the corridors of Vidhana Soudha have given fresh ammunition to BJP to attack Congress PHOTO: PTI

Congress banking on guarantees

Congress sources said the government's guarantees -- 'Shakti', 'Gruha Lakshmi', 'Gruha Jyoti', 'Yuva Nidhi' and 'Anna Bhagya' -- have caught the imagination of the people and the party would harp on them in the run-up to the elections.

The party has been alleging that the Central government has been indifferent towards Karnataka in giving the State its due share and has not provided the assistance it had requested to tackle drought in many parts of the state. "We gave the first memorandum to the Centre on 20 October, 2023 to release Rs 18,172 crore for drought mitigation but till now the Centre did not give even a penny," Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said. The Chief Minister along with his cabinet colleagues, Congress MLAs and MPs on 7 February staged a demonstration in Delhi against the "injustice" to the State in releasing funds.

BJP to harp on 'Pakistan zindabad' slogans case

On the other hand, BJP President JP Nadda set the tone for the party's campaign while addressing booth-level party workers at Chikkodi in Belagavi district earlier this week. He accused the Congress and its party government in Karnataka of being soft on terrorists as he referred to the chanting of 'Pakistan zindabad' slogans during the victory celebrations of Congress candidate Syed Naseer Hussain in Rajya Sabha elections. *—PTI*

ROYAL FRIEND IN NEED

BJP may field Yaduveer from Mysuru LS seat

MYSURU, 9 MARCH

PHOTO: SALAR

BJP is considering fielding Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, the scion of the erstwhile Mysuru royal family, from the Mysuru-Kodagu constituency in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Speculations are rife that the incumbent MP, Pratap Simmha, might not secure the ticket this time, opening the door for the scion of the royal family. Although Yaduveer's name has been circulating for a while, it has now been proposed in BJP Central Election Committee meeting chaired by Amit Shah.

BJP leaders, including former chief minister BS Yediyurappa have reached out to him, awaiting approval from royal family member Pramoda Devi.

The legacy of the Wadiyars, particularly Sri kantadatta Narasimharaja Wadiyar, the son of the last Maharaja of Mysore, Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, holds significant sway in the region. Srikantadatta served as the MP of Mysuru four times, earning respect for the royal family's contributions to education, irrigation, and overall development. Given the reverence for the royal family in Mysuru, the BJP sees potential in Yaduveer's candidacy to sway voters, especially in Old Mysuru region.

In the 2014 General Election, Simmha defeated Congress candidate by 31,608 votes, while in the 2019 election, he trounced the Congress-JD(S) alliance candidate by 1,38,647 votes.

—Salar News

People wait in a queue to fill water from an RO kiosk at Chickpet in Bengaluru on Saturday PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Water crisis driving firms from City: BJP

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Information technology and biotechnology companies do not want to invest in Bengaluru anymore due to the water problems in the City, said Leader of Opposition R Ashoka on Saturday.

"Drinking water of Bengaluru has been a topic of discussion in international media," Ashoka said. People in the State have been suffering from drought because of the Congress government, Ashoka said.

The failure of the Congress government to provide water and compensation for the farmers during the drought has resulted in a higher rate of immigration. "All the people in the villages are leaving for Hyderabad, Goa and other states because of drought. Only aged people are found in villages," Ashoka said.

Ashoka claimed that Congress released Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu because of the INDIA Alliance. "The water problem is only going to intensify," Ashoka said.

Responding to the allegations of Ashoka, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said the Congress is open to constructive suggestions from the Opposition on the water crisis but they do not seem to know anything other than criticism. *—Salar News*

PRAISES PM

INDIA making secularism a joke, says Deve Gowda

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

JD(S) supremo and former prime minister HD Deve Gowda said on Saturday that the INDIA bloc is a bundle of groups who have made secularism a joke.

In a veiled attack on the INDIA bloc, he reminded them that TMC leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was a Railway Minister during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government.

Similarly, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin's father and former CM M Karunanidhi was with BJP for six years. His son-in-law was a minister in the Union government. TMC and DMK are part of the INDIA bloc.

"We can quote several instances. The so-called secularism in this country, if anybody speaks (about it), people say it's a joke. NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar has joined hands with former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. A Congress member was a Speaker (in Maharashtra). I can quote several cases and these developments don't suit the real meaning of secularism," Gowda told PTI in an exclusive interview.

HD Deve Gowda PHOTO: PTI

> They were unable to get the recognition (of Opposition party) in two terms in Parliament. No use of talking about the Congress party," he noted
>
> -HD Deve Gowda, JD(S) Supremo

On Congress' allegation that his Janata Dal (Secular) has joined hands with the communal BJP, the former prime minister sought to know how many states the grand old party is ruling. It is only in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, he said.

The 90-year-old leader heaped praise on Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the latter is seeking a mandate for the third time. Modi is different from Vajpayee. BJP under Vajpayee's leadership was not able to cross more than 180 seats in Lok Sabha polls, while Modi got 282 seats (BJP alone) and with NDA partners, it was over 350 seats in his first term. Now he is aiming to cross 400 seats along with the alliance, Gowda said.

Gowda advised the Opposition parties to realise that Modi is the tallest leader today, which people should accept.

On Congress allegations that in the last 10 years, there is autocracy and certain "crony capitalists" have benefited and not the poor and deserving, the former prime minister wondered what strength Congress has today and how many seats they can expect. "They were unable to get the recognition (of Opposition party) in two terms in Parliament. No use of talking about the Congress party," he noted.

On the seat-sharing formula between BJP and JD(S) in Karnataka for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Gowda said his party has not set any conditions.

—PTI

HC stops Cong man from talking about Simha

MYSURU, 9 MARCH

High Court has restrained KPCC Spokesperson M Lakshman from conducting any media conference or publishing defamatory statements against Mysuru-Kodagu MP Pratap Simha.

This decision came in response to an appeal filed by Lok Sabha member Simmha challenging a previous order issued by City Civil and Sessions Court on 6 March.

During the hearing, lawyer M Arun Shyam, representing Simha, argued that Congress leader Lakshman had been repeatedly making false and unsubstantiated allegations against the BJP MP. These accusations made through media conferences were causing controversy and being widely circulated in print, electronic and social media platforms. As Lok Sabha elections draw near, such allegations not only tarnish Simha's reputation but also pose a threat to his political career, Shyam said.

The lawyer said Lakshman had not lodged any complaint against Simmha with any competent authority or court. Instead, he was misusing his freedom of speech to tarnish Simha's image.

—Salar News

These trains will have 16 cars per trainset PHOTO: SALAR

BJP launches reel competition

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

- Organised under State BJP Yuva Morcha, the competition will run for a month.

Embracing the popularity of reels on social media platforms, State BJP has launched a competition encouraging youngsters to create reels showcasing Central government's schemes and achievements.

Organised under Karnataka State BJP Yuva Morcha, the competition will run for a month and aims to connect with the youth through reels.

The competition features four categories, namely women, youth, farmers and the poor, allowing creators to highlight the progress made under each category. Each reel must have a maximum duration of one-and-a-half minutes (90 seconds).

The top 10 reels, determined by the highest number of likes, will earn their creators the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visits Bengaluru as part of Lok Sabha election campaign.

These top 10 reels will be shared by BJP Yuva Morcha on its social media platforms. Additionally, the top three reels will be shared by Karnataka BJP President BY Vijayendra and other State leaders through their social media channels. *—Salar News*

'STATE TO PRODUCE 60K MW POWER'

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

State aims to generate 60,000 megawatts of electricity in the next seven years, said Chief Minister Siddaramaiah at Raitha Sourashakthi Mela at Gandhi Krishi Vigyana Kendra (GKVK) in Yelahanka on Saturday.

Raitha Sourashakthi Mela was held to promote self-sufficiency among farmers through the adoption of solar energy and to reduce the dependence on conventional electricity for irrigation. The agricultural fair was attended by thousands of farmers across the City. The mela consisted of exhibitions and informative sessions for the farmers on solar energy.

Initiatives such as Kusum B and Kusum C were launched to increase the use of solar pump sets. The State government has also increased the subsidy for solar pump sets from 30 per cent to 50 per cent to promote the adoption of solar energy. To ease the process for farmers who are interested in adopting solar energy pump sets, an app Soura Mitra app was launched at the mela by Siddaramaiah. *—Salar News*

Vaishnaw unveils India's first trainset carbody

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw inaugurated India's first carbody structure of Vande Bharat Sleeper trainset.

The trainset was manufactured by Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) at its rail unit in Bengaluru.

He said the carbody structure is crafted with high-grade Austenitic stainless steel, featuring crashworthy elements integrated into the crash buffers and couplers.

Complying with stringent safety standards, all materials and aggregates in the trainset adhere to the fire standard requirements.

Integral Coach Factory (ICF), Chennai, placed an order with BEML Limited in May 2023 for the design, manufacture and commissioning of 10 Rakes of 16 cars Vande Bharat Sleeper version trainsets. As per the technical aspects of Vande Bharat Sleeper trainsets, these trains will have 16 cars per trainset. *—ANI*

Cafe blast: NIA seeks citizens' cooperation

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

- NIA has said the identity of those who provide information about the suspect would remain confidential. The video shows the suspected bomber walking inside the BMTC bus and sitting on the seat.

National Investigation Agency (NIA) probing Rameshwaram Cafe blast has released two videos of the alleged accused on its social media account and sought citizen's cooperation in identifying the suspect, an official said.

NIA has said the identity of those who provide information about the suspect would remain confidential. The 49-second first video shows the suspected bomber walking inside the BMTC bus and sitting on the seat. He gets up from the middle seat and moves towards the backside of the bus to avoid the CCTV camera. He is then seen sleeping in the backseat and later gets down from the bus. The second video of nine seconds shows the movement of the suspected bomber without his hat at a bus stop. The video also shows how he strolls at the bus stop in front of the closed police outpost.

"NIA seeks citizen's cooperation in identifying the suspect linked to the Rameswaram Cafe Blast case. Call 08029510900, 8904241100 or email to info.blr.nia@gov.in with any information. Your identity will remain confidential," the message from the NIA headquarters said. *—IANS*

WEEK AFTER BLAST

Patrons swarm Rameshwaram Cafe after reopening

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Customers were seen lining up inside the cafe to place their orders PHOTO: SALAR

Rameshwaram Cafe at Brookfield near Whitefield bustled back to life on Saturday morning, eight days after a low-intensity blast at the eatery left 10 injured.

On Saturday morning, co-founder and CEO of The Rameshwaram Cafe, Raghavendra Rao along with his staff sang the National Anthem before welcoming the customers who had to pass through the metal detectors installed at the entrance of the eatery.

Customers were seen lining up inside the cafe to place their orders. By 8am, the eatery was back to its normal business serving breakfast to its customers as usual.

As customers settled into their favourite booths, the familiar hum of conversation filled the cafe once more. Laughter mingled with the clinking of cups, a comforting reminder of the normalcy that had been temporarily disrupted

A sense of relief and joy filled the air as customers, some familiar faces, others new, patiently waited their turn. Shreya, an IT employee and a regular customer, told Salar News "It's fantastic to have this place back. Rameshwaram Cafe is more than just a place to get a cup of coffee, it's a hub for our community. It feels like things are getting back to normal."

The security has been upped at the café. "We have doubled the security here and one security personal will be doing rounds now and then to ensure everything is alright. After the blast, it's everyone's responsibility to remain vigilant and keep an eye out for danger," said a security official, who did not wish to be named.

Rao said, "We have strengthened our security team and are also trying to set up a separate panel involving ex-service personnel who could train our security guards at all our branches." The staff was in full swing to welcome its customers and serve them with the delicious food. "We're so happy to be back serving our customers. There's a special energy here today. It feels like a victory," said Ramesh S, a waiter. For many customers, the initial shock of the incident had subsided, replaced by a sense of solidarity with the cafe and its staff.

—Salar News

Woman killed in stampede at BJP event in Nagpur

Nagpur, 9 March

A 50-year-old woman was killed and four others were injured in a stampede at a programme organised by BJP in Maharashtra's Nagpur city on Saturday, police said. The incident occurred at an event organised by BJP's Nagpur city unit in Reshimbagh area around 10.30am. Utensils were being distributed to construction workers during the programme, and a massive crowd gathered at the venue. The victim, Manu Tulshiram Rajput, collapsed in the stampede and was rushed to a government hospital, where doctors declared her dead, the official said, adding that four other women sustained minor injuries. A case of accidental death has been registered, and a probe has been initiated into the incident. *—PTI*

West Bengal Jhargram MP Kunar Hembram quits BJP

Kolkata, 9 March

BJP MP from West Bengal's Jhargram Kunar Hembram on Saturday said he has resigned from his party for "personal reasons". Hembram, who had in the morning said that he was resigning from the Lok Sabha as well, in the afternoon told that he would continue as an MP. Hembram, a first-time MP, said he was not joining any other political party. "I will spend my time writing a book and doing social service," he added. State BJP spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya said, "Hembram had informed the party about his decision a few days back." BJP is yet to announce its candidate for the Jhargram seat, located in the state's Jangal Mahal region which the party swept in the 2019 elections. TMC claimed that Hembram took the decision sensing that BJP would lose the seat. "He knows BJP is going to lose the seat. So he decided to quit," TMC MP Santanu Sen said. *—PTI*

Opposition spreading rumours of BSP alliance: Mayawati

Lucknow, 9 March

BSP Chief Mayawati on Saturday said some Opposition parties were spreading rumours about BSP allying ahead of Lok Sabha polls. The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister reiterated that Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) will contest the elections on its own. In a post in Hindi on X, Mayawati said, "BSP is fighting the Lok Sabha elections on its own and is completely prepared." "Rumours about BSP forming an electoral alliance or a third front are fake and wrong. Media should not publish such mischievous news and the people should also be careful," she added. Mayawati said Opposition parties in Uttar Pradesh in particular seemed to be "quite restless" due to BSP contesting the elections alone. "This is why they keep trying to mislead people by spreading various kinds of rumours every day. But, in the interest of the Bahujan community, BSP's decision to contest the elections alone is firm," she said. *—PTI*

NC will win 3 LS seats in J&K for INDIA bloc: Farooq

Jammu, 9 March

After PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti expressed unhappiness over the National Conference's decision to contest all three Lok Sabha constituencies in Kashmir, NC President Farooq Abdullah on Saturday said both parties are part of the INDIA coalition and the NC will win the seats for the alliance. Mehbooba Mufti had on Friday said that the NC's decision was "disappointing" and a "setback to the hopes of the people of J&K". She also accused the NC of reducing their Peoples Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) to a "joke"."I do not know what she (Mufti) had said National Conference stands on its own feet and has won three seats (in the 2019 general elections). We are part of the alliance and she is also part of the alliance. If the National Conference wins (these seats) again, they will win it for the INDIA alliance and so what is the problem," Abdullah told reporters here. *—PTI*

PM accuses Cong of ignoring Northeast for decades

Narendra Modi inaugurated projects worth Rs 17,500 crore in Assam

JORHAT, 9 MARCH

Asserting that the Northeast's development is crucial to fulfil the objective of 'Viksit Bharat', Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday accused the Congress of ignoring the region for decades.

Speaking at a public gathering in Meleng Meteli Pothar, after inaugurating projects worth Rs 17,500 crore in Assam, Modi emphasised the significance of Northeast India's development for realising the vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India).

He criticised the previous Congress government, stating that they had neglected the region for decades since Independence.

'During Congress rule, foundation stones of many development projects were laid, photographs were taken but after that it was forgotten for years', Modi said.

It was left to the BJP government to complete many projects that had been started by the Congress, he added.

'Our government has given special emphasis on infrastructure, health and energy projects for the overall development of the region', he said.

He accused the previous Congress government's "insensitive and unplanned conservation strategy" that led to poaching in the park.

Around 27 rhinos were killed in 2013 but the number of such poaching incidents came down to zero in 2022 due to the NDA government's policies, he said.

Referring to the unveiling of the 'Statue of Valour' of legendary Ahom General Lachit Barphukan earlier at Hollongapar, Modi said this was a "tribute to his courage and is a symbol of our government's recognition of the braveheart'.

'Both Virasat and Vikas (heritage and development) is the mantra of our double-engine government and we are committed to the development of the state and North East', he said.

Modi said the BJP government has also initiated expansion of the Digboi and Guwahati refineries which will double the capacities while the expansion of the Numaligarh refinery will treble its capacity.

"Modi considers the people of North East as his family members and several projects have been initiated for the development of the region', he said.—*PTI*

Narendra Modi during his visit to the Assam's Kaziranga National Park, on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

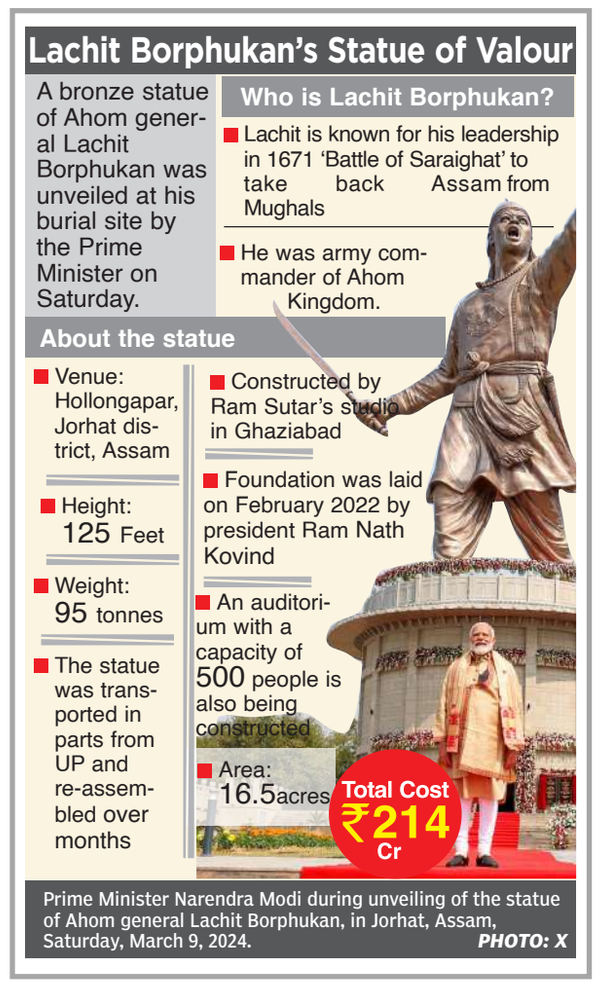
- During Congress rule, foundation stones of many development projects were laid, photographs were taken but after that it was forgotten for years', Modi said.

WHY HASN'T PM VISITED MANIPUR YET: CONGRESS

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Assam's Kaziranga National Park, the Congress on Saturday attacked the Centre over the "increasingly disturbed" situation in different parts of the Northeast, and asked why the Prime Minister had not found time to visit the violence-hit Manipur yet.

In a swipe at Modi, Jairam Ramesh said, "We're glad that Mod has found time amidst his various travels to spend today morning in Kaziranga, an iconic national park which owes much to the great interest shown both by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi." "On June 19th, 2020, at the all-party meet on China, the Prime Minister declared that not a single Chinese soldier had crossed over into Indian territory. By giving a public clean chit to China, the has tied his own hands, and failed to take action to restore the status quo," Ramesh alleged.—*PTI*


Lachit Borphukan's Statue of Valour
A bronze statue of Ahom general Lachit Borphukan was unveiled at his burial site by the Prime Minister on Saturday.
Who is Lachit Borphukan?
Lachit is known for his leadership in 1671 'Battle of Saraighat' to take back Assam from Mughals
He was army commander of Ahom Kingdom.
About the statue
Venue: Hollongapar, Jorhat district, Assam
Height: 125 Feet
Weight: 95 tonnes
The statue was transported in parts from UP and re-assembled over months
Constructed by Ram Sutar's studio in Ghaziabad
Foundation was laid on February 2022 by president Ram Nath Kovind
An auditorium with a capacity of 500 people is also being constructed
Area: 16.5acres
Total Cost ₹214 Cr

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during unveiling of the statue of Ahom general Lachit Borphukan, in Jorhat, Assam, Saturday, March 9, 2024. *PHOTO: X*

Borphukan gets 125ft statue in Jorhat

JORHAT, 9 MARCH

A bronze statue of Ahom general Lachit Borphukan was unveiled at his burial site in eastern Assam's Jorhat district by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday.

It was unveiled at the Lachit Barphukan Maidam Development Project at Hollongapar near Teok. The area, spread over 16.5 acres, is being developed as a tourist spot, highlighting the history of the region. Lachit Borphukan was a legendary army commander . He died at the age of 49 due to illness and was buried at the 'maidam' -- burial grounds for Ahom royals and nobles -- at Hollongapar. *—PTI*

SUKHU SLAMS REBELS

The MLAs are rebelling against Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu *PHOTO: PTI*

11 HP MLAs move to U'khand, BJP says govt will fall soon

RISHIKESH, 9 MARCH

Six Himachal Pradesh Congress MLAs who voted against party nominee Abhishek Manu Singhvi in the Rajya Sabha elections, along with three Independent lawmakers, have shifted to a hotel in BJP-ruled Uttarakhand amid an ongoing rebellion against Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu.

Two BJP MLAs Vikram Thakur and Trilok Jamwal from Himachal Pradesh were accompanying the legislators, who arrived in Rishikesh from Haryana's Panchkula by a chartered flight late on Friday and checked into Hotel Taj.

Congress MLAs Sudhir Sharma, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhanpal, Devinder Kumar Bhuttu, Ravindra Thakur and Chaitanya Sharma have since been disqualified for defying the party whip on the state budget.

They have approached the Supreme Court for relief in the matter.

Three Independent MLAs Hoshiar Singh, KL Thakur and Ashish Sharma were also with them when they arrived.

Security around the hotel has been tightened and no one is being allowed to enter the premises except those who have advance online bookings.

Meanwhile, Union Minister of State for Development of North Eastern Region BL Verma told reporters in Haridwar that the Congress government in Himachal Pradesh will soon fall.

He claimed Rahul Gandhi's actions have eradicated the Congress in Uttar Pradesh and will wipe it out from all over the country after the Lok Sabha elections.

Verma was in Haridwar to attend a 'Sahakarita Sammelan' organised at yoga guru Ramdev's Patanjali Yogpeeth.

Replying to a question about the presence of the Himachal Pradesh MLAs in Uttarakhand, Verma said the case of their expulsion is in the Supreme Court and the BJP honours the courts.

He also described the Samajwadi Party as a family-oriented organisation that will not be able to open its account in the general elections.

Calling the ongoing farmers' movement politically motivated, he claimed the budget for farmers was only Rs 21,900 crore in 2013-14. It has been increased by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to 1.25 lakh crore. *—PTI*

ANOTHER SETBACK

Blow to Congress as former Union min Pachouri joins BJP

Suresh Pachouri served as a four-time Rajya Sabha member of the Congress *PHOTO: PTI*

BHOPAL, 9 MARCH

In a significant political development in Madhya Pradesh, veteran leader and former Union minister Suresh Pachouri bid adieu to his five-decade allegiance with Congress, and joined BJP on Saturday.

Pachouri, accompanied by former MP Gajendra Singh Rajukhedi and a cadre of ex-MLAs, joined BJP in a ceremony in the presence of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, state BJP president VD Sharma, and former CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan at BJP state headquarters.

Pachouri, 71, a long-time associate of the Gandhi family, had a notable political career within Congress, having served as minister of state for defence and as a four-time Rajya Sabha member. His criticism of Congress post-defection highlighted the party's shift towards caste-based politics.

"I have served in Defence Ministry. Never were questions raised about the Army's bravery. There was never a talk to provide 'evidence' (as sought by Congress leaders regarding the 'surgical strikes')," Pachouri said.

Pachouri's decision to join BJP was met with praise from former CM Chouhan, who emphasised the veteran leader's commitment to serving the nation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

"Pachouri ji joined BJP without setting any conditions. When Pachouri ji was asked about it, he said Congress has become irrelevant and doesn't have leadership and policy. He wanted to serve the country under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership," Chouhan said. *—PTI*

Ex-Arunachal CM Nabam Tuki resigns at state Congress chief

Itanagar, 9 March

Former Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Nabam Tuki has resigned as the president of the state Congress, ahead of Lok Sabha and the assembly elections. Tuki sent his resignation to All India Congress Committee on Friday, following the defection of three party MLAs to BJP, he said. "The former chief minister resigned on moral grounds as he could not prevent the MLAs from defecting to other political parties," APCC general secretary Gyamar Tana said. Tuki represents Sagalee assembly constituency in the state. Earlier this month, Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader Lombo Tayeng, a six-time MLA from Mebo in East Siang district, joined BJP. *PTI*

Ex-Cong Punjab MLA joins AAP

Chandigarh, 9 March

In a setback to Congress, its former MLA Gurpreet Singh GP on Saturday joined Aam Aadmi Party in the presence of Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann. Singh was MLA from Bassi Pathana assembly constituency in Fatehgarh Sahib District. Cabinet Minister Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer said AAP will get a boost in Fatehgarh Sahib. Singh said the reason for quitting Congress was "lack of discipline". "I like work of Mann. He is an honest leader. That is why we are joining AAP. Today, at the grassroots level, people only speak about AAP." *PTI*

'Census will junk 50% quota cap'

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Saturday underlined his party's resolve to conduct a caste census if voted to power, asserting that based on this right step along with economic mapping, the 50 per cent cap on the reservation would be "uprooted".

Gandhi said Congress' slogan is "count" because that would be the first step towards justice.

In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said, "Have we ever wondered who is poor? How many are there and in what condition? Is it not necessary to count all this?"

The caste survey conducted in Bihar revealed that 88 per cent of the poor population comes from Dalit, tribal, backward, and minority communities, Gandhi added.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said a comprehensive socio-economic caste census will help the government to understand the various aspects related to the people.

"Without knowing who the people of India are, what their experiences are, and what their circumstances are, no government can take the country forward in the right direction," he said.

For better governance and a more prosperous, just, and harmonious India, a socio-economic caste census is extremely essential, Ramesh asserted.

"Who pays the price of rapid development and who benefits from it -- these are the questions," Ramesh added. *—PTI*

Rahul Gandhi *PHOTO: PTI*

Video of BJP's Vijayvargiya's banter with ex-poll rival viral

BHOPAL, 9 MARCH

A video of BJP minister Kailash Vijayvargiya's banter with his former political rival Sanjay Shukla during an event, where the latter joined the ruling saffron party here on Saturday, went viral on social media.

In the video, Vijayvargiya is seen jokingly saying that although he was verbally abused in the past by Shukla, who was with the Congress earlier, the latter is now being inducted into BJP. Several Congress leaders, including former Indore-1 MLA Shukla joined BJP under the leadership of former Union Minister Suresh Pachouri, in Bhopal on Saturday.

Shukla was Congress candidate against Vijayvargiya, who is now a cabinet minister in Madhya Pradesh, from Indore-1 seat in the November 2023 elections.

In the fiercely-contested election, Vijayvargiya defeated Shukla, son of a senior BJP leader, by a margin of over 57,000 votes.

While offering a BJP scarf to Shukla, Vijayvargiya, said in a lighter vein, "You abused me and now we have to induct you into the party." His statement triggered laughter.

Shukla's father, the late Vishnu Shukla, was a senior BJP leader of Indore. Sanjay Shukla, however, was a Congress leader and contested as its candidate in the 2018 assembly and emerged victorious. *—PTI*

Screengrab from the viral video *PHOTO:X@HARSHT2024)*

MATTER OF LIFE & DEATH

BJP Ch'garh unit seeks 'Z' security after Naxals kill party leaders

BIJAPUR, 9 MARCH

In the wake of murder of two BJP leaders by suspected Naxalites in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur, the district unit of the party has written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah requesting to provide 'Z' category security to its office-bearers.

In the letter dated 7 March, Chief of BJP's Bijapur district unit Srinivas Mudliyar said, frustrated over anti-Naxal operations by BJP government in the state, Naxalites have been targeting the party leaders.

Mudliyar has sought 'Z' category security for himself and eight other office-bearers of the district unit.

On 1 March, BJP leader Tirupati Katla was killed by Naxalites in Toynar village when he had gone to attend a wedding while another leader Kailash Nag was killed in a similar attack in Jangla police station area in the district on 6 March.

Naxalites are hitting out at operations against them *PHOTO: PTI*

- **Mudliyar has sought 'Z' category security for himself and eight other office-bearers**

"Recently, a party leader was brutally murdered. There is an atmosphere of fear among BJP leaders and workers in the districts, many of them are the target of Naxalites. The incidents of murder have prompted party leaders to change their locations from time to time," he said.

Naxalites have become frustrated due to ongoing anti-naxal operations by BJP government and resorted to target the party leaders, he said in the letter. He urged Union home minister to provide permanent 'Z' category security to nine office-bearers of BJP's district unit.

In the last year, at least eight leaders or members of BJP were killed by suspected Naxalites in Maoist-affected areas of the state. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

4 killed in Andhra Pradesh as bikes ram into each other

ALLURI,9 MARCH

Four people were killed after four motrocycles they were riding on collided with each other in in Arakuloya mandal in the Alluri Sitharama Raju (ASR) district of Andhra Pradesh, a police official said. The incident took place on the Friday night on the occasion of Mahashivratri. According to ASR District Police, 11 people were travelling on four bikes during the time of the accident. While three people died on the spot, a fourth person succumbed to his injuries in hospital. Six others who were injured in the incident have been admitted to hospital and their condition are critical, police said adding that one person sustained only minor injuires. The bike riders were on their way to the Ganjai Guda Jathara, police said.—*ANI*

Man held for kidnapping, raping 9-year-old in UP

SAHARANPUR, 9MARCH

A 32-year-old man has been arrested for allegedly raping a nine-year-old girl here, police said on Saturday. Superintendent of Police (City) Abhimanyu Manglik said the victim was allegedly kidnapped and raped when she had come to visit her aunt with her mother in the Kutubsher police station area on Wednesday. The girl was found lying unconscious in a forest in Kolagarh village in Saharanpur on Thursday and was admitted to a medical college for treatment, the (SP) said. Following the incident, the girl's father lodged a complaint and a case was registered, the officer added. During the investigation, police examined CCTV footage and identified the accused, Rajesh, who was then arrested on Friday evening, the SP said.—*PTI*

17-yr-old jumps off college building in Telangana, dies

HANAMKONDA, 9 MARCH

A 17-year-old intermediate girl student died allegedly after jumping off her college building in Telangana's Hanamkonda, police said on Friday. The girl, identified as Sahithya, was found dead by college authorities. Officials said that the exact reason behind the incident is yet to be determined, and no complaints have been filed regarding the same. "This incident occurred at a private college in Bheemaram area. The deceased was residing in a hostel. The college management found her body this morning," said Sanjeev, an inspector with Hanamkonda Police. He said that the body has been transferred for post-mortem examination, and an investigation into the incident has been initiated. "The exact reason behind the girl jumping off the building is yet to be known," he added.—*ANI*

Doctor duped of ₹7.33 L as fraudster poses as cop

PATNA, 7 MARCH

A 27-year-old doctor of a civic-run hospital here was allegedly duped of Rs 7.33 lakh by a cyber fraudster who posed as an officer of the Mumbai police, an official said on Saturday. A case under sections 419 (cheating by personation), 420 (cheating) and 465 (forgery) of the Indian Penal Code and relevant provisions of the Information Technology Act was registered against the unidentified accused last week, the official said. The complainant, Dr Blessy Esther, a senior doctor at KEM Hospital, alleged that she received a call from an unknown caller who identified himself as an employee of a courier company, he said.—*PTI*

Ex-DMK leader arrested for ₹2,000 cr drug trafficking

The opposition in the state has been targeting DMK over the matter

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) on Saturday said it has arrested Jaffer Sadiq, a former DMK party functionary in Tamil Nadu, in connection with an international drugs trafficking investigation case estimated to be worth more than Rs 2,000 crore.

The federal anti-narcotics agency has termed Sadiq as the "mastermind and kingpin" of this illicit network spread between India, Australia, and New Zealand.

Sadiq, a producer of Tamil films, was recently expelled by the ruling DMK from the party after his name and purported links to the drugs network were mentioned by the agency. He was the Chennai West deputy organiser of the DMK's NRI wing.

The opposition BJP and AIADMK in the state have been targeting the DMK over the matter.

Last month, the NCB said, it arrested three people, all hailing from Tamil Nadu, and seized 50 kg of narcotics-making chemical pseudoephedrine during a raid at a godown in Delhi.

Jaffer Sadiq, a producer of Tamil films, was recently expelled by ruling DMK over his purported links to a drug network PHOTO: X

The searches by the NCB alongwith the special cell of the Delhi Police came about on a tip-off they received towards the end of 2023 from the Australian and New Zealand authorities about "large quantities" of pseudoephedrine concealed in desiccated coconut powder and mix food powder being smuggled into their countries from India.

An additional input from the US DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) indicated that the source of these consignments was in the national capital, the NCB had said in a statement.

The three arrested people allegedly said that a total of 45 pseudoephedrine consignments were sent by them over the last three years, containing about 3,500 kgs of pseudoephedrine valued at over Rs 2,000 crore in the international market, as per the NCB.

The NCB since then had been looking for Sadiq to "ascertain the source" of this pseudoephedrine and had also raided his premises in Chennai recently.

Alleging that the state has turned into a den of drugs under the DMK rule, AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami said on Friday that Chief Minister MK Stalin owes an explanation to the people on how Jaffer Sadiq gained access to a senior police officer.

"Jaffer Sadiq became close to the DMK leadership and even obtained a gift from a DGP. This is very unfortunate and anguishing and needs to be condemned," Palaniswami told reporters in Chennai. —*PTI*

- The searches by the NCB alongwith the special cell of the Delhi Police came about on a tip-off they received from the Australian and New Zealand authorities about "large quantities" of pseudoephedrine concealed in desiccated coconut powder being smuggled into their countries from India

76 students hospitalised due to food poisoning

NOIDA, 9 MARCH

As many as 76 students were hospitalised due to suspected food poisoning after having dinner made for those observing Mahashivratri fast at a private hostel in Uttar Pradesh's Greater Noida, police said on Saturday.

The students, who are enrolled at different colleges, had the dinner on Friday after which many of them complained of uneasiness, dizziness and vomiting, police said.

The students were staying at Aryan Residency in the Knowledge Park area -- an educational hub -- and had 'puris' made of 'kuttu ka atta' (buckwheat flour) on account of Mahashivratri on Friday.

"The local police are seized of the incident which took place on Friday evening after around 76 students had their dinner and then complained of their stomachs getting upset. All the students were taken to different hospitals and their condition is stable now," police said in a statement.

There is no law and order issue due to the incident and the matter is being probed, it added.

Meanwhile, a team of the local food safety department rushed to the site for an inspection.

"The team will collect samples of food items and raw materials used to prepare the dinner. The samples would be analysed and legal proceedings initiated accordingly," an official told PTI.

Students said they had dinner which was cooked separately for them owing to their fast. —*PTI*

PASSING OUT PARADE

Cadets during the Passing Out Parade and Pipping Ceremony, at the Officers Training Academy (OTA), in Chennai on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

Woman thrashed by bouncers at club

GURUGRAM, 9 MARCH

An woman from Uttarakhand was allegedly thrashed by the bouncers of a club here police said on Friday. The woman claimed the bouncers "tried to strangle" her and threw her out "without any reason," they said. The entire incident that happened Wednesday evening was captured on the CCTV cameras installed at the club. According to the complaint filed by Aditi, a native of Dehradun, the incident took place at a club located in a service lane beside the Delhi-Gurugram Expressway. She was at the club with her friends, the complainant said.

The incident happened around midnight when three to four bouncers came -- two of them women, the woman said.

"They started abusing without any reason and started fighting as I was defending myself. Megha (a bouncer) started hitting me. The male bouncers tried to strangle me. During this, I got injuries and face and my shirt got torn," Aditi said. —*PTI*

AgniKul set to launch India's second privately built rocket

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

IIT-Madras incubated startup AgniKul Cosmos is all set to launch its 3D printed sub-orbital rocket Agnibaan SOrTeD later this month from its private launchpad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota.

The announcement of the launch window for India's second privately built rocket was made by the Chennai-based space startup through a cryptic post on X.

" 22-28 March, 2024," AgniKul Cosmos said in a post on the social networking platform.

In August last year, AgniKul started the process of integrating its Agnibaan SubOrbital Technological Demonstrator (SOrTeD) at its private launchpad in Sriharikota. The Agnibaan rocket is a two-stage launch vehicle equipped to place payloads of up to 100 kg into a low earth orbit at a distance of 700km. Skyroot Aerospace was the first private company to launch a sub-orbital rocket Vikram-S. India's space regulator IN-SPACe released an integrated manifesto last month for the next five quarters, which mentioned AgniKul's SOrTeD launch in the last quarter of the current fiscal. Agnibaan SOrTeD is a single-stage launch vehicle powered by AgniKul's patented Agnilet engine, a 3D-printed, single-piece, six kilonewtons (kN) semi-cryogenic engine. —*PTI*

The Agnibaan rocket is a two-stage launch vehicle equipped to place payloads of up to 100 kg into a low earth orbit PHOTO: X

People panic as leopard attacks surge in HP dist

HAMIRPUR, 9 MARCH

Leopard attacks against several people in various parts of Himachal's Hamirpur district and their preying on dogs, goats and sheep have caused fear among the locals.

On Friday, a pair of leopards (male and female) were sighted in the Gujrehra village of Chabutra gram panchayat of Hamirpur.

Ajay Kumar, a villager, told PTI he had seen one of them sitting on a wall near his house. It started roaring when it saw people, he said.

Kamlesh Kumar, a local, was injured in a leopard attack on Thursday when he was returning home from a function in Jol-Kohta village of Dhamrol Panchayat. The area lies adjacent to Trilokpur Badaihar forest.

PHOTO: X

Another person was attacked by a leopard in Jol village.

The incidents have since struck fear among locals, especially the children, who are considered an easy prey for leopards.

In another incident, a leopard attacked a motorcyclist in the forest on the Sulangwan-Bharadi road in Hamirpur. —*ANI*

'India got 1st under-river metro due to Cal HC'

KOLKATA, 9 MARCH

The first under-river metro tunnel inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 6 March in Kolkata might not have become a reality today had a judge not taken a keen interest in it, experts associated with the project said.

Justice Dipankar Datta, currently in the Supreme Court, was a Calcutta High Court judge in 2012, when a difference in opinion between the Ministry of Railway and the West Bengal government brought the under-the-river project to a deadlock.

In 2008, the Ministry of Urban Development and the West Bengal government collaborated to constitute a special-purpose vehicle, the Kolkata Metro Rail Corporation (KMRC), to complete the 16.6 km-long East-West Metro Corridor.

The route starts from Salt Lake, Sector V (the east end) and after crossing 10 stations -- Karunamayee, Central Park, City Centre, Bengal Chemical, Salt Lake Stadium, Phoolbagan, Sealdah, Esplanade, Mahakaran, Hawrah --" it terminates at Howrah Maidan at the west end. The river tunnel part is between Mahakaran and Howrah which connects Howrah and Kolkata.

Tamal Biswas, Project Manager said, "Justice Dutta entertained the petition and after his valued intervention realignment issue was resolved in August 2015. He spent a lot of time with all the stakeholders to bring this iconic Project on track for people at large."—*PTI*

POST DIPLOMATIC ROW

Indians visiting Maldives drop by 33 pc: Report

MALE, 9 MARCH

The number of Indian tourists visiting the Maldives has dropped by 33 per cent as compared to last year, Maldivian website Adhadhu reported, citing data from the Maldives Tourism Ministry.

This comes as the diplomatic row between New Delhi and Male continues to deteriorate.

According to Tourism Ministry statistics for 2023, 41,054 Indian tourists visited the Maldives by 4 March last year. The number of Indian tourists recorded as of March 2 this year was 27,224. This was 13,830 lesser than last year, Maldives-based Adhadhu reported.

In the same period last year, India was the second largest source market for tourists to the Maldives with a 10 per cent market share. However, India is now in sixth place on the list with a six percent market share.

The row erupted after three Maldivian deputy ministers made derogatory comments against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, over his pictures from the visit to Lakshadweep. Prime Minister Modi had called for the Indian island cluster to be developed as a destination for beach tourism and promotion of domestic tourism.

The matter snowballed into a major diplomatic row, with New Delhi summoning the Maldivian envoy and registering a strong protest against the viral posts.

India remained the top tourist market for the Maldives through 2021-23 with more than 2,00,000 tourists each year.

However, China is the top market now with more than 54,000 tourist arrivals so far this year. —*ANI*

According to Tourism Ministry statistics for 2023, 41,054 Indian tourists visited the Maldives by 4 March last year PHOTO: PIXABAY

- The row erupted after three Maldivian deputy ministers made derogatory comments against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, over his pictures from the visit to Lakshadweep

IN WAYANAD

Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan on Saturday decided to hand over the investigation of the death of 20-year-old J S Sidharthan veterinary student to CBI PHOTO: X

CBI takes over Kerala student's death case

T'PURAM, 9 MARCH

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Saturday decided to refer to the CBI the investigation into the recent death of a Veterinary University student that has rocked the state.

A statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said that the father and relatives of the student -- 20-year-old Sidharthan JS -- came to meet Vijayan and demanded that the case be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

The Chief Minister told them that the police investigation was going on and all the accused had already been arrested through a flawless and fair probe, the statement said.

However, as the victim's mother has also submitted a petition seeking a CBI probe, Vijayan informed the family that he has decided to leave the investigation of the case to the CBI, respecting their sentiments, it said.

"The Chief Minister said that if a CBI probe is required, then it will be ordered. He has given me that assurance," the victim's father said.

He also said that he informed Vijayan that in view of the injuries suffered by his son, as noted in the post mortem report, many doctors have said that Sidharthan could not have even stood up to hang himself.

He also told reporters that the mere suspension of the Dean of the College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences at Pookode in Wayanad district of the state and the assistant warden of the hostel, where Sidharthan died, was not enough.

"They should be dismissed from service and should also face legal action," he demanded.

He said that if the probe is handed over to the CBI, he has a lot more to tell that agency about the dean and the assistant warden.

The police in its remand report regarding one of the accused in the case had told a court recently that the victim was assaulted viciously.

The report said that a belt and a cable wire were used to assault Sidharthan.

It said that his classmates and senior held a public trial inside the hostel alleging that he had misbehaved with a girl student of the college.

"He was stripped down to his underwear and the accused assaulted him. Some of them used a belt and a cable wire," the report said. Police have charged the 18 accused in the case under sections 341 (wrongful restraint), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 324 (voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapon), 306 (Abetment of suicide), of the Indian Penal Code and relevant sections of the Kerala Prohibition Of Ragging Act. —*PTI*

- Chief Minister told them that the police investigation was going on and all the accused had already been arrested

PRAYER AMIDST WAR

Palestinians pray in front of a mosque destroyed by the Israeli airstrikes in Rafah, Gaza Strip, on Friday
PHOTO: PTI

Legal equality for women could take 300 years

1 out of 10 women lives in extreme poverty
PHOTO: PTI

Legal equality for women could take centuries as the fight for gender equality is becoming an uphill struggle against widespread discrimination and gross human human rights abuses, the United Nations chief said on International Women's Day.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told a packed UN commemoration on Friday that "a global backlash against women's rights is threatening, and in some cases reversing, progress in developing and developed countries alike".

The most egregious example is in Afghanistan, he said, where the ruling Taliban have barred girls from education beyond sixth grade, from employment outside the home, and from most public spaces, including parks and hair salons.

At the current rate of change, legal equality for women could take 300 years to achieve and so could ending child marriage, he said.

Guterres pointed to "a persistent epidemic of gender-based violence", a gender pay gap of at least 20 per cent, and the under-representation of women in politics. He cited September's annual gathering of world leaders at the UN General Assembly, where just 12 per cent of the speakers were women.

"And the global crises we face are hitting women and girls hardest — from poverty and hunger to climate disasters, war and terror," the secretary-general said.

In the past year, Guterres said, there have been testimonies of rape and trafficking in Sudan, and in Gaza women women and children account for a majority of the more than 30,000 Palestinians reported killed in the Israeli-Hamas conflict, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health.

He cited a report Monday by the UN envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict that concluded there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape, "sexualised torture" and other cruel and inhumane treatment of women during its surprise attack in southern Israel on October 7. He also pointed to reports of sexual violence against Palestinians detained by Israel.

International Women's Day grew out of labour movements in North America and across Europe at the turn of the 20th century and was officially recognised by the United Nations in 1977. This year's theme is investing in women and girls to accelerate progress toward equality.

Roza Otunbayeva, the head of the UN political mission in Afghanistan, told the Security Council on Wednesday that what is happening in that country "is precisely the opposite" of investing in women and girls.

There is "a deliberate disinvestment that is both harsh and unsustainable", she said, saying the Taliban's crackdown on women and girls has caused "immense harm to mental and physical health, and livelihoods".

Recent detentions of women and girls for alleged violations of the Islamic dress code "were a further violation of human rights, and carry enormous stigma for women and girls", she said.

It has had "a chilling effect among the wider female population, many of whom are now afraid to move in public", she said.

Otunbayeva again called on the Taliban to reverse the restrictions, warning that the longer they remain, "the more damage will be done".

Sima Bahous, the head of UN Women, the agency promoting gender equality and women's rights, told the commemoration that International Women's Day "sees a world hobbled by confrontation, fragmentation, fear and most of all inequality."

"Poverty has a female face," she said. "One in every 10 women in the world lives in extreme poverty."

Men not only dominate the halls of power but they "own USD 105 trillion more wealth than women," she said.

Bahous said well-resourced and powerful opponents of gender equality are pushing back against progress. The Opposition is being fuelled by anti-gender movements, foes of democracy, restricted civic space and "a breakdown of trust between people and state, and regressive policies and legislation", she said.

"We all feel this pushback acutely," Bahous said. "Our values and principles have never been as challenged as they are today."

Guterres urged nations to prioritise equality for women and girls. He announced that the UN is launching a "Gender Equality Acceleration Plan" to support governments in designing and implementing policies and spending that respond to the needs of women and girls.

Bahous drew strong applause when she called for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, which Guterres has long sought as well. She also urged funding for women and girls, stressing that when this happens economies grow, governments thrive and peace is achieved sooner.

"But in spite of these clear facts, we continue to stubbornly invest in weapons more than we invest in women and girls," Bahous said. *—AP*

SALAR ساڈ

Kasaravalli's 'Dweepa' was left to rot for six years

The original camera negative of a film that won two national awards was left to rot for six years for want of Rs 30,000.

Legendary Kannada filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli's 2002 film 'Dweepa', starring yet another legendary name in the south, Telugu superstar Soundarya, who also produced the film, had been moved to a warehouse with no air conditioning – without it the negative deteriorates – after the closing of Prasad Labs in Chennai six years ago.

The negative was stored in the lab, which had asked for Rs 30,000 as a one-time fee to release it from its storage.

"When the lab was shut down, it instructed the producer of the film to collect the negative after paying the fee," Kasaravalli said.

But Kasaravalli said the process got complicated as the producers of the film, Soundarya and her brother Amarnath passed away in a tragic aircraft crash in 2004, and Soundarya's husband, GS Raghu, who now has the rights to the film, is not a film professional and has no interest in the movie.

"Also, we were in a dilemma. National Film Archive of India (NFAI) had stopped accepting films for storage because it was going to shut down (in March 2022, NFAI merged with National Film Development Corporation). Even if we had gotten the negative, there was no place to store it. Private archives charge a monthly rent for storage, but who will foot the bill?" added Kasaravalli.

On 4 March, during a master class session on 'Dweepa', for the 15th Bengaluru International Film Festival (BIFFes), GS Bhaskar, a noted cinematographer who had worked with Kasaravalli on his film on 'Gandhi' and 'Kurmavatara', had informed those gathered that Prasad Lab has now agreed to release the film.

The session was moderated by Bhaskar and saw the technicians of 'Dweepa', cinematographer HM Ramachandra Halkere, who had won the national award for Best Cinematography for the film and art director Shashidhar Adapa, as well as Kasaravalli discuss its making in detail.

"I was just informed about it, I guess it may take about two weeks to finalise all the formalities," Bhaskar said.

When contacted, founder-director of FHF, Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, a filmmaker himself, said if films by Kasaravalli require restoration or preservation, FHF will do it without a second thought.

He also pointed out that FHF has already committed itself to digitally restore Kasaravalli's 'Ghatashraddha' (1977).

FHF is teaming up with Martin Scorsese and George Lucas to digitally restore 'Ghatashraddha' as part of its World Cinema Project, founded by Scorsese and funded by Lucas, he said.

"The digital restoration of 'Ghatashraddha' will be done at L'Immagine Ritrovate in Bologna, Italy from the original camera negative preserved at NFAI," said Kasaravalli.

As for 'Dweepa', first must start from restoring the damage done to the original camera negative, added Kasaravalli, who has won 14 national awards.

Kasaravalli estimates that even a partial restoration will cost anything between Rs 2 lakh and Rs 5 lakh.

Dungarpur said one of FHF's recent projects involved the restoration of Odia film, 'Maya Miriga' by Nirad Mohapatra, which too was languishing at the warehouse of Prasad Lab.

"They had removed 12 reels of the 16 mm original camera negative from the lab storage for non-payment of dues. You know, 'Maya Miriga' is the most celebrated film in the history of Odia cinema," said Dungarpur.

According to him, the retrieved reels had deteriorated so badly that it took them several months of manual patching up before it could be sent to Bologna for scanning.

"The reels had broken perforations, shrinkage, mould, halos, strong base distortion and colour fading. It was so bad that when scanned, the image was blurred, had scratches, tears, dust and dirt, frequent and long lasting vertical lines and halos. We had to restore some portions using the two 35 mm prints that were stored at NDFC-NFAI, but they were bad too – faces were blurred and film was grainy. We had to make do with whatever we had. In all, it took us three years," said Dungarpur.

Whether 'Dweepa' will face a similar fate will be known only after assessing the damage done to the negative, said Kasaravalli.

"But of course whoever is restoring it will be doing it for the love of cinema, because no one is going to make any money from 'Dweepa' anymore," he added. *—PTI*

Girish Kasaravalli, producer of the film 'Dweepa'
PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

NOTA toothless without right to reject, say experts

Nota was introduced in 2013 for the voters to decide not to vote for any candidates in the fray
PHOTO: FACEBOOK/ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

- In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the highest number of NOTA votes (51,660) were polled in Bihar's Gopalganj, another reserved SC constituency, where it secured the third spot getting 5.03 per cent of the total votes Overall in different state and general elections, votes polled on NOTA have been between 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent, according to data compiled by ADR

More than 10 years after a Supreme Court judgement paved way for introduction of the NOTA button on EVM for polls, the number of voters choosing it still remains low, with the experts dubbing it as a "toothless tiger" with no implications on the results.

NOTA (None of the Above) was introduced in India through the Supreme Court's judgement in September 2013. The need to introduce NOTA was felt to discourage the parties from fielding tainted candidates.

The Supreme Court directed the Election Commission to make necessary provision in the ballot papers/EVMs so that the voters can decide not to vote for any of the candidates in the fray.

Introduced in 2013, the NOTA option on electronic voting machines has its own symbol - a ballot paper with a black cross across it.

After the Supreme Court order in September 2013, the Election Commission added the NOTA button on the EVMs as the last option on the voting panel. One ballot unit has 16 buttons.

Before the apex court order, those not inclined to vote for any candidate had the option of filling what is popularly called form 49-O. But filling out the form at the polling station under Rule 49-O of the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, compromised the secrecy of the voter.

However, even as NOTA has secured over 1.29 crore votes in the state assembly elections and the Lok Sabha elections combined in the last five years, the number of candidates with criminal records has increased in both the general and the assembly elections.

According to a report by Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the share of MPs with declared criminal cases against them has been increasing in the last decade.

While 30 per cent elected MPs had criminal cases against them in 2009, which went up.

Of the 543 winners analysed by the ADR in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, 162 (30 per cent) had declared criminal cases against them, with 76 (14 per cent) had serious criminal cases against them.

In 2019, the share of MPs with criminal and serious criminal cases increased to 43 per cent and 29 per cent.

"NOTA has made no difference as far as criminality is concerned, in fact the number of candidates with criminal cases has increased," Major General (Retd) Anil Verma, Head of ADR, said.

"The concept of NOTA was that some pressure would be on the parties not to field tainted candidates. It has not happened," he said.

Overall in different state and general elections, votes polled on NOTA have been between .5 per cent to 1.5per cent, according to data compiled by the ADR.

It secured around 1.06 per cent votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, and among states, highest was when it got 1.98 percent of the total votes in the 2018 Chhattisgarh Assembly polls. The lowest number of votes NOTA in the Lok Sabha was 100 votes in Lakshadweep, and among the state polls, it secured the lowest percentage of vote share - 0.46 per cent in both the Delhi State Assembly Elections, 2020, and the Mizoram State Assembly Elections, 2018.

"Unfortunately, it turned out to be a toothless tiger. It merely provided a platform to express dissent or one's anger for political parties to take note and nothing more," Maj Gen Verma (Retd) said.

He, however, pointed out that overall, the percentage of NOTA votes in seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribe has been slightly higher, which may indicate there are more grievances among these groups.

"In the reserved constituencies, we have seen the percentage of NOTA votes are higher. Perhaps the tribals and SCs have more grievances so they go in larger numbers for NOTA," he said.

Constituency wise, NOTA has secured as high as 27,500 votes in Maharashtra's Latur Rural constituency, a seat reserved for the SC community, over 13 per cent of the total votes. NOTA got the second spot, with Congress' Dhiraj Deshmukh winning with over 67 per cent of the total votes.

In 'Red Alert Constituencies', the seats with three or more candidates with criminal cases contesting the elections, NOTA secured 26, 77,616 votes (26.77 lakhs) in the state assembly elections since 2018. It ranges from 1.63 per cent in Bihar in 217 red alert constituencies to 0.43 per cent in Delhi.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the highest number of NOTA votes (51,660) were polled in Bihar's Gopalganj, another reserved SC constituency, where it secured the third spot getting 5.03 per cent of the total votes.

Axis India Chairman Pradeep Gupta said there is a requirement to give more teeth to the NOTA option.

"I believe that candidates, who have lost against NOTA should not get a chance to contest again. That is what the logic is all about. Since there is no such rule, many voters think what the point of choosing NOTA is?" Gupta asked.

"In 2014, 1.08 pc voters chose NOTA, the percentage was 1.06 per cent in 2019. It is a sizeable number but I believe it is more due to error and less due to intention," Gupta said.

"But if a rule is brought in barring the rejected candidates from contesting again, I believe the number will go up like anything. The political parties understand the sensitivity of this and that is why I believe no one will favour such a law and hence NOTA is a toothless option," he added.

Calls have also been made for scrapping NOTA. Former Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel had last year sought scrapping NOTA, stating that in certain cases it polled more votes than winning margin.

In 2018, the Supreme Court had ruled that NOTA option should not be given in the Rajya Sabha elections. *—PTI*

Plaints filed over separatist views of Sikh BBC ancho

London, 9 March

Several members of the Indian diaspora have expressed concern and complained to the BBC over the alleged "pro-Khalistan separatist views" of a new British Sikh presenter who recently joined its Asian Network lineup. Jaspreet Kaur, a writer and teacher, began hosting Asian Network Chill' weekly at the British Broadcasting Corporation earlier this month. "Taking time to chill, whatever that might mean for you, is so important," Kaur said on social media, announcing her new role at the public broadcaster. "As an author, poet, teacher and new mum, I know how hard it can be to slow down. But hopefully if you catch my new Chill Show, you'll feel inspired to step back, slow down, be present and more mindful. I'll be exploring interesting new ways to look after our wellbeing whilst listening to the best soothing tunes," she said. Soon after, some of her social media posts dating back a few years began circulating among Indian diaspora networks, expressing concerns over her separatist views.
—BBC News

9 killed in Wisconsin crash involving semi-truck, van

MADISON, 9 MARCH

A crash on Friday at a western Wisconsin highway intersection involving a semitrailer and a van reportedly killed nine people. Preliminary reports indicated the semitrailer on State Highway 95 collided with a van travelling on County Highway J, the sheriff's department said in an earlier statement.The van entered the intersection and was struck by the semitrailer, the sheriff's department said. The crash left Highway 95 closed. Overhead video footage showed both vehicles on their sides. It wasn't clear exactly how many people were riding in the two vehicles.
—AP

US Army helicopter crashes near Mexico border; 2 killed

Texas, 9 March

At least two people were killed after a National Guard helicopter with one National Guardsman and three Border Patrol agents on board crashed near the US-Mexico border in Texas, the New York Post reported. The chopper went down in La Grulla, a tiny town in Starr County along the Rio Grande River, officials told Border Report news portal was cited in the New York Post.
One National Guardsman and three Border Patrol agents were aboard the helicopter at the time of the crash, according to the outlet. The Texas Department of Public Safety also confirmed that the helicopter was not involved in "Operation Lone Star" -- the state's border enforcement effort that uses its National Guard and other law enforcement units.
Border Patrol sources told Fox News that Mexican cartel members were watching the helicopter on one of its drones when it crashed.
—AP

Judge upholds Bill allowing 30,000 migrants into US

HOUSTON, 9 MARCH

The Biden administration can keep operating a programme that allows a limited number of migrants from four countries to enter the US on humanitarian grounds after a federal judge on Friday dismissed a challenge from Republican-led states. US District Judge Drew B Tipton said Texas and 20 other states had not shown they had suffered financial harm because of the humanitarian parole program that allows up to 30,000 asylum-seekers into the U.S. each month from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela combined. That was something the states needed to prove to have legal standing to bring the lawsuit.
Eliminating the programme would undercut a broader policy that seeks to encourage migrants to use the Biden administration's preferred pathways into the US or face stiff consequences.
—AP

Houthi rebels target Singapore-flagged ship

US shoots down 15 Houthi drones in Gulf of Aden, Red Sea

DUBAI, 9 MARCH

An attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels on Friday set off explosions ahead of a Singapore-flagged vessel in the Gulf of Aden, authorities said.

The attack targeted the bulk carrier Propel Fortune, which continued on its way, according to the United States military's Central Command.

"The missiles did not impact the vessel," Central Command said. "There were no injuries or damages reported."

The Houthis did not immediately claim responsibility for the attack.

Early on Saturday, the US Navy, allied warships and aircraft shot down 15 bomb-carrying Houthi drones in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, American officials said.

Friday's explosions came after a Houthi missile struck a commercial ship in the Gulf of Aden on Wednesday, killing three of its crew members and forcing survivors to abandon the vessel.

The Houthis describe the attacks as trying to pressure Israel into stopping the war *PHOTO: X*

It was the first fatal strike in a campaign of assaults by the Iranian-backed group over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Other recent Houthi actions include an attack in February on a fertiliser-carrying cargo ship, the Rubymar, which sank on Saturday after drifting for several days, and the downing of an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The US also conducted airstrikes Friday that it said destroyed two Houthi truck-mounted anti-ship missiles in Yemen. The rebels similarly did not directly acknowledge any destruction from those strikes. The Houthis have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014. They've battled a Saudi-led coalition since 2015 in a long-stalemated war there. Since the US began its airstrike campaign in January, the Houthis have acknowledged the killing of at least 22 of its fighters.
—AP

Gaza aid ship expected to set sail from Cyprus

Rafah, 9 March

A ship carrying desperately needed humanitarian aid is expected to set sail this weekend, bound for Gaza. The Spanish vessel, Open Arms, is scheduled to depart from Cyprus - the closest EU country to Gaza - and hopes to use a newly opened shipping route. With no functioning port and shallow waters, it is still unclear where the ship will dock when it reaches Gaza. The UN says a quarter of the Strip's population is on the brink of famine and children are starving to death. It will tow a barge loaded with 200 tonnes of food provided by US charity World Central Kitchen, Open Arms founder Oscar Camps told the Associated Press.
—BBC News

AID AIRDROP KILLS 5 IN GAZA AFTER PARACHUTE FAILS

RAFAH, 9 MARCH

Five people were killed and several injured after a parachute landing a humanitarian airdrop failed to open, bringing a pallet crashing down into a crowd of people waiting for food north of Gaza City's Shati refugee camp.

The government media office in Gaza confirmed the casualties after the incident on Friday, lambasting the "useless" airdrops as "flashy propaganda rather than a humanitarian service" and calling for food to be allowed through land crossings.

"We previously warned it poses a threat to the lives of citizens in the Gaza Strip and this is what happened today when the parcels fell on the citizens' heads," it said.

Reporting from Rafah, in southern Gaza, Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud said that people are experiencing "a tragedy" in the north of Gaza.

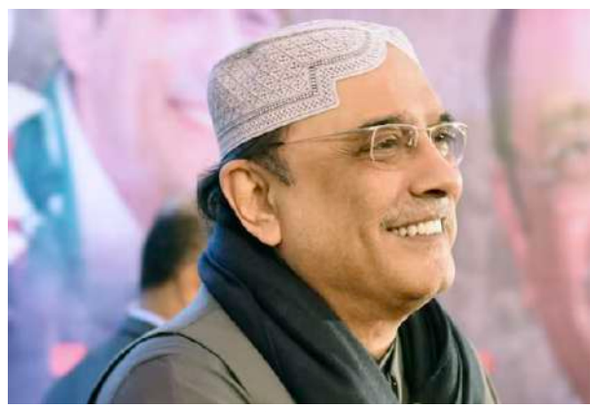
"Not only are they confronted with the lack of food and medical supplies, but as they wait for packages of food, they are either targeted by the Israeli military or killed by a non-functional parachute," Mahmoud said.

United States military denied responsibility
—Courtesy, Al Jazeera

FOR 2ND TIME

Asif Zardari elected Pakistan's 14th President

ISLAMABAD, 9 MARCH



He received 255 votes while his opponent got 119, Pakistani media reported *PHOTO: PTI*

Pakistan Peoples Party Co-Chairperson Asif Ali Zardari was elected as Pakistan's 14th President on Saturday, becoming the head of state for a second time.

Zardari, 68, was the joint candidate of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) while his rival Mahmood Khan Achakzai, 75, was the candidate of the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC).

He received 255 votes while his opponent got 119 votes in the National Assembly and the Senate.

The new president was elected by the electoral college of the newly elected members of the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies, as per the provisions of the Constitution.

In the Sindh Assembly, where Zardari's PPP is at the helm, he bagged the most votes while he also swept the Balochistan Assembly votes bagging all votes polled there.

He also defeated Achakzai in the Punjab assembly.

In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly, where SIC/PTI has the government, Achakzai got the most votes against Zardari.

- In the Sindh, where Zardari's PPP is at the helm, he bagged the most votes

A businessman-turned-politician, Zardari is the husband of slain Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Zardari would replace the incumbent Dr Arif Alvi, whose five-year term ended last year. However, he has continued since the new electoral college was not yet formed.

Zardari, who served as the president from 2008 to 2013, will also be the first civilian to be elected for the second time as president. He is expected to be sworn in on Sunday.

Achakzai is the head of his Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP) and was contesting from the platform of the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), which came to prominence after independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) joined it.
—PTI

Violence in Haiti leads to food, water shortages

PORT-AU-PRINCE, 9 MARCH

Rotting fruit, withered vegetables, empty water jugs and spent gas canisters now stock the stores and stand that serve Haiti's poor. It is a consequence of the unrelenting gang attacks that have paralysed the country for more than a week and left it with dwindling supplies of basic goods.

The terrifying violence as anti-government gangs battle police in the streets has crippled the fragile economy and made it extremely difficult for many of the country's most vulnerable

PHOTO: PTI

have enough to eat, and 1.4 million are starving.

Grocery stores in upscale parts of the capital remain stocked, but their goods are out of reach to most in a country where most people earn less than $2 a day.

"People are desperate for water," said Jean Gérald, who was hawking blackened tomatoes and shriveled scallions on a recent day, confident they would sell quickly because food is so scarce in parts of Port-au-Prince. "Because of gang violence, people will go hungry."

Next to him were rows of empty jugs he hadn't been able to refill because the violence had forced one of the country's main bottled water operators to shut down.

Scores of people have been killed and more than 15,000 have been forced from their homes since coordinated gang attacks began on 29 February.
—AP

POLLS TODAY

Corruption mars Portugal as it elects new govt, parl

LISBON, 9 MARCH

Portugal is holding an early general election on Sunday when 10.8 million registered voters will elect 230 lawmakers to the National Assembly, the country's parliament. The lawmakers will then choose a new government.

Two moderate parties that have alternated in power for decades — the centre-left Socialist Party and the centre-right Social Democratic Party — are once again expected to capture most votes. These are the issues that have been at the heart of the campaign:

Two moderate parties that have alternated in power for decades *PHOTO: PTI*

Corruption scandals
The election is taking place because a Socialist government collapsed in November during a corruption investigation. The scandal included a police search of Prime Minister Antonio Costa's official residence and the arrest of his chief of staff. Costa has not been accused of any crime.

Housing crisis
House prices in Portugal jumped by around 80 per cent and rents rose by 30 per cent between 2010 and the second quarter of last year, European Union statistics show. Those increases were way above wage rises.
—AP

VIDEO FOOTAGE OF NIJJAR'S KILLING IN CANADA SURFACES

OTTAWA, 9 MARCH

The purported video footage of the killing of India designated terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar has surfaced, showing Nijjar being shot by armed men in what has been described a 'contract killing', Canada-based CBC News reported.

Nijjar, who was designated a terrorist by the National Investigation Agency in 2020, was shot and killed as he came out of a Gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia, on 18 June, 2023.

The video has been obtained by The Fifth Estate and has been independently verified by more than one source said CBC news. The attack that is described as being 'highly coordinated' involved six men and two vehicles.

The apparent targeted killing of the president of the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara ultimately led to accusations from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that the government of India had a hand in the killing -- a claim that denied by India and led to the deterioration of diplomatic ties between Canada and India.

The video shows Nijjar leaving the parking lot of the Gurdwara in his grey Dodge Ram pickup truck.

As he approaches the exit, a white sedan pulls in front of him, blocking his truck. Two men then run up and shoot Nijjar before escaping in a silver Toyota Camry, CBC News reported.

The two witnesses, who were playing soccer in a field nearby when the incident happened, revealed that they ran towards the place from where the gunshots were heard and also tried to chase the assailants.
—ANI

'UFO sightings secret military tests'

WASHINGTON, 9 MARCH

A spike in UFO sightings in the 1950s and 60s was caused by tests of advanced US spy planes and space technology, a Pentagon report has concluded.

Officials also said there was "no evidence" that the US government had encountered alien life.

Most sightings of UFOs were ordinary objects from Earth, according to the report submitted to Congress on Friday.

But Pentagon officials accepted that their research won't quell popular beliefs about alien visitors.

The report is part of a broad public attempt by the US government to examine UFOs - or as officials call them, "unidentified anomalous phenomena" (UAP).

The effort has included public meetings with Nasa officials and hearings in Congress.

Issued by the Pentagon's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), the report noted that public opinion has been swayed by pop culture.

A "particularly persistent narrative", the researchers said, is that the government has recovered spacecraft and alien remains and conspired to keep its alien research activities secret.

A Pentagon spokesperson said that officials had approached the report in an open-minded way, but had simply found no evidence of extra-terrestrial visitors.

investigations dating back to 1945.

The researchers hunted down rumours about alien spacecraft and found, for instance, that an alleged 1961 leaked memo about UFOs was inauthentic, and that an "alien spacecraft" sample collected by a UAP investigating organisation was not made of an otherworldly material but instead was made mostly of magnesium, zinc and bismuth. The report lists new technologies that researchers believe led to spikes in UAP reports in the 1950s and 60s.
—BBC News

Russian hackers steal Microsoft source code

A company spokesman would not characterise what source code was accessed and what capability the hackers gained *PHOTO: PTI*

BOSTON, 9 MARCH

Microsoft said on Friday it's still trying to evict the elite Russian government hackers who broke into the email accounts of senior company executives in November and who it said have been trying to breach customer networks with stolen access data.

The hackers from Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service used data obtained in the intrusion, which it disclosed in mid-January, to compromise some source-code repositories and internal systems, the software giant said in a blog and a regulatory filing.

A company spokesman would not characterise what source code was accessed and what capability the hackers gained to further compromise customer and Microsoft systems. Microsoft said on Friday that the hackers stole "secrets" from email communications between the company and unspecified customers — cryptographic secrets such as passwords, certificates and authentication keys —and that it was reaching out to them "to assist in taking mitigating measures".

Cloud-computing company Hewlett Packard Enterprise disclosed on January 24 that it, too, was an SVR hacking victim and that it had been informed of the breach — by whom it would not say — two weeks earlier, coinciding with Microsoft's discovery it had been hacked.

Cybersecurity experts said Microsoft's admission that the SVR hack had not been contained exposes the perils of the heavy reliance by government and business on the Redmond, Washington, company's software monoculture.
—BBC News

US PASSES $460B BILL TO AVERT GOVT SHUTDOWN

WASHINGTON, 9 MARCH

The US Senate passed a package of six government funding bills worth USD 460 billion, on Friday averting the shutdown just hours ahead of the deadline, CNN reported.

After lawmakers raced the clock to get the measure across the finish line, the legislation now advances to President Joe Biden's desk for his signature.

The Office of Management and Budget ceased shutdown preparations Friday because Congress had approved the Bill, the White House said, according to the pool.

The Senate voted 75-22 on Friday to pass the measure, after the House approved the legislation on Wednesday.

The spending bills - backed by the top Democrats and Republicans in both chambers - represent a major breakthrough for lawmakers after months of averting shutdowns at the eleventh hour with stopgap bills.

Although, Congress has finally passed updated legislation to fund critical government departments and agencies through the rest of the fiscal year, the lawmakers still need to finalise and pass a second slate of funding bills ahead of 22 March deadline.
—ANI

CRACKDOWN ON OPPN

Many Russian dissidents still serving time after Navalny's death

TALLINN, 9 MARCH

Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to secure his fifth term in power this month on the heels of Opposition leader Alexei Navalny's death in prison. His death devastated Kremlin critics and spurred concerns about the safety of other imprisoned dissidents.

Putin has gone from tolerating dissent to suppressing anyone who dared challenge him during his 24-year rule. Over the past decade, his government has restricted freedom of speech and assembly, targeted people considered threats to the Kremlin, and restricted access to independent news outlets.

Most Opposition politicians are in prison or exile, and the 71-year-old Russian leader faces only token contenders.

Some of the prominent dissidents in prison today are:

Vladimir Kara-Murza, serving 25 years
A prominent Opposition figure, Vladimir Kara-Murza was convicted of treason in April 2023 and handed the stiffest sentence for a Kremlin critic in modern Russia.

The charges against Kara-Murza, who has been behind bars since 2022, stem from a speech that year to the House of Representatives in Arizona, where he denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The government has restricted freedom of speech and assembly, targeted people considered threats to the Kremlin *PHOTO: PTI*

The 42-year-old political activist, who started out as a journalist, was an associate of Russian opposition leader and fierce Putin critic Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015.

Ilya Yashin, serving eigh-and-a-half years
Yashin, 40, was arrested in June 2022 while walking in a Moscow park. He was sentenced to eight-and-a-half years in prison after he was convicted for spreading false information about Russian soldiers.

The charge stemmed from a YouTube livestream in which he talked about civilians slain in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha. Yashin, member of a Moscow municipal council, was a vocal Navalny ally and a close associate of Nemtsov's. He is serving time in Russia's western Smolensk region.
—AP

Bajaj markets offers free CIBIL score checks

PUNE, 9 MARCH

Bajaj Markets, a subsidiary of Bajaj Finserv, facilitates free CIBIL score checks for its users. This service enables individuals to gain insights into their credit history, enabling them to make informed financial decisions. Through the streamlined online process on Bajaj Markets, users can effortlessly check their credit scores and understand their eligibility for various credit card and loan offers. Users can also leverage the platform to explore a plethora of financial offerings, including investment options and insurance policies. A one-stop destination where its customers can explore a host of products which can help them achieve their financial life goals. Having started its journey as a fintech, Bajaj Markets has since then built a very strong business as a techfin. It offers a wide gamut of Digital Technology Services which span across Digital Applications, Enterprise Solutions, Data Engineering, Business Analytics, Quality Engineering and Cloud Services.
—ANI

'Office space demand at 50-55 MnSq Ft across top-6 cities'

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Office space demand in India's six major cities will remain healthy this year as domestic and foreign firms are expected to lease 50-55 million square feet area to expand their businesses, according to a FICCI-Colliers report. Gross leasing of office space stood at 58.2 million square feet across six major cities namely Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Pune. Industry body FICCI and real estate consultant Colliers India earlier this week released its report 'India Office: Repurposed to scale-up'. The report has given three scenarios for office demand forecast – optimistic, realistic, and pessimistic. In a realistic scenario, the gross leasing of Grade-A office space is estimated at 50-55 million square feet this year across these six cities. The demand could go up to 55-60 million square feet in an optimistic scenario, while the leasing numbers could drop to 45-50 million square feet in a pessimistic scenario. Grade-A office space leasing by domestic origin occupiers has been witnessing significant momentum in recent years, with its share in total leasing rising from 34 per cent in 2019 to almost 50 per cent in 2023, the report highlighted.*—PTI*

Vaishnaw launches India's fastest router in Bengaluru

It will help nation become a global manufacturing hub

BENGALURU, 9 MARCH

Union Minister of Communications, Electronics & Information Technology and Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw
PHOTO: PTI

- In a significant stride towards technological independence and innovation, Union Minister for Communications, Electronics and Information Technology and Railways, AshwiniVaishnaw launched India's fastest and indigenously designed IP/MPLS (Multiprotocol Label Switching) router in Bengaluru on Saturday.

In a significant stride towards technological independence and innovation, Union Minister for Communications, Electronics and Information Technology and Railways, AshwiniVaishnaw launched India's fastest and indigenously designed IP/MPLS (Multiprotocol Label Switching) router in Bengaluru on Saturday.

MPLS is a routing technique in telecommunications networks that directs data from one node to the next, based on labels rather than network addresses.

The project is spearheaded by the collaboration of the government's Department of Telecom, CDOT and Nivetti.

It marks a momentous achievement in the nation's journey towards becoming a major product and manufacturing hub in the global tech landscape.

Vaishnaw said, "It is matter of pride for us that indigenously developed and made in India router, a secure router, a core routers of capacity 2.4 tbps has been developed and launched today. This is a core router, which is secure and which can actually provide very important functions in our entire Prime Minister's vision of Digital India."

He further said, "Today, manufacturing is no longer the old manufacturing where it was practically a mechanical kind of activity, where you go to fix cut things in a particular size. Today's manufacturing is a manufacturing where there is lots and lots of software in it, lots and lots of innovation in it, lots and lots of combination of brain power in the hardware which is today's manufacturing."

It is pertinent to note that the Nivetti router, capable of handling 2.4 tbps data, represents a leap in networking technology, promising to bolster India's digital infrastructure and support the ever-growing demand for high-speed data processing and transmission.

This achievement is a direct result of the government's concerted efforts to create an enabling environment for innovators through policy measures, financial incentives, and a regulatory framework designed to eliminate obstacles and encourage development.

Reflecting on the global tradition of nurturing innovation through supportive policies, Vaishnaw reiterated the government's commitment to enhancing market opportunities, boosting exports, and streamlining regulations to aid innovators.

The initiatives introduced under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, including design-linked innovation, production-linked incentives (PLI) and a variety of startup-friendly schemes, are set to be scaled up significantly, aiming at propelling India to the forefront of global innovation and product development.
—ANI

'CITIZENS FIRST APPROACH'

'India saved consumers from price rise'

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Hardeep Puri PHOTO: PTI

India did not put the burden of rising energy prices on its citizens when global prices of LPG skyrocketed, and instead followed a citizen's first approach, Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Hardeep Puri said on Saturday.

During the Covid period from June 2020 to June 2022, the international prices of LPG increased by around 300 per cent, according to the central government.

However, to insulate consumers from fluctuations in international LPG prices, the cost increase was not fully passed on to consumers of domestic LPG. Accordingly, domestic LPG prices were raised by only 72 per cent during this period, leading to significant losses for the oil marketing companies.

Despite these losses, the public sector oil marketing companies have ensured continuous supplies of this essential cooking fuel across the country.

"When the international prices went up, we allowed the price domestically only to go up by 70 per cent, rest of it was absorbed...In this period, the prices came down by 4.56 per cent in Delhi. We were having no issues with the availability... You have to refine the crude oil in a refinery to make petrol and diesel. The prices of petrol and diesel were reduced in November 2021 and May 2022," Minister Hardeep Puri said at a press conference.

He added the central government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi ensured only a marginal price rise, which led to under-recovery of about Rs 28,000 crore for oil companies.
—ANI

India and the four-nation European bloc EFTA will sign a free trade agreement on Sunday
PHOTO: PTI

India, EFTA to sign free trade agreement today

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

India and the four-nation European bloc EFTA will sign a free trade agreement on Sunday with an aim to boost two-way trade in goods, services and investments, an official said.

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.The pact received approval from the Union Cabinet on 7 March, the official said.

India and EFTA have been negotiating the pact, officially dubbed as Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA), since January 2008 to boost economic ties.

The agreement has 14 chapters, including trade in goods, rules of origin, intellectual property rights (IPRs), trade in services, investment promotion and cooperation, government procurement, technical barriers to trade, and trade facilitation.

EFTA has 29 free trade agreements (FTAs) with 40 partner countries, including Canada, Chile, China, Mexico, and Korea.

Under free trade pacts, two trading partners significantly reduce or eliminate customs duties on the maximum number of goods traded between them, besides easing norms to promote trade in services and investments.EFTA countries are not part of the European Union (EU).

It is an inter-governmental organisation for the promotion and intensification of free trade.

It was founded as an alternative for states that did not wish to join the European community.

India's exports to EFTA countries during 2022-23 stood at USD 1.92 billion against USD 1.74 billion in 2021-22.

Imports aggregated at USD 16.74 billion during the last fiscal compared to USD 25.5 billion in 2021-22.T

The trade gap is in favour of EFTA, according to the commerce ministry data.
—PTI

The emerging micro-markets at Dwarka Expressway

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

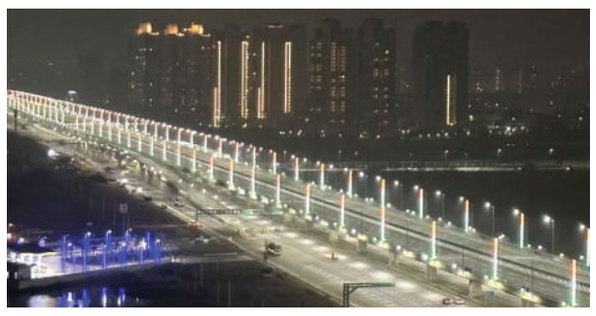
The millennium city Gurugram has come a long way to become one of the fastest-growing metropolitan cities in India. Positioned southwards of the national capital, the bustling city is a thriving hub for growth and development.

As the city emerges as a sought-after destination for modern commercial buildings and prolific neighborhoods, it has witnessed noteworthy infrastructural developments, leading to a remarkable boom in the real estate market.

The much-anticipated inauguration of Dwarka Expressway proves to be the lifeline behind this development, leading to a surge in the market. Property rates are growing steadily in the Dwarka expressway region, yet lower than other established micro-markets in Gurgaon.

The surrounding areas along the 8-lane expressway comprise sec 73- 95 and sec 102-113. The top 5 micro-markets in the region include sec 83, 104, 88, 91, and 99, with sector 83 as one of the fastest-growing micro markets in the area, with a total of 6470 total housing units.

The sector indicates an average PSF of 7271 and a 6.5% CAGR from 2018-23. Gurgaon's spellbinding development has resulted in the growth of housing price trends in these micro-markets. The lowest housing price trend is observed in sec 99 with 4570 INR/ Sq Ft. in Jan 2018, achieving the highest point of 8437 INR/ Sq. Ft. in Jan 2023. As an aftermath of accelerated growth, property values and leasing rates have risen sharply, making it beyond reach for many.



The infrastructural development along the Expressway makes it a thriving hub for residential and commercial reasons PHOTO: PTI

The infrastructural development along the Expressway makes it a thriving hub for residential and commercial reasons. The evolution of the Dwarka Expressway into a potent commercial hub positions the region as a key driver for economic growth in the Delhi-NCR region and offers a promising future for businesses.
—ANI

India pushes for design changes in coal power plants

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

India's federal coal ministry has recommended modifications in the design of coal-based power plants to facilitate the use of indigenous coal, in a bid to enhance energy security and reduce dependence on imported coal. According to a report by S&P Global Commodity Insights, the proposal, outlined in a report released by an inter-ministerial committee on 7 March, also includes considerations for imposing higher taxes on imports of coal with high gross calorific value (GCV).The report titled "Strategy Paper on Coal Import Substitution" suggests that power plants relying on imported coal should retrofit their boilers and plants to accommodate the specifications of Indian thermal coal.According to the federal coal ministry, India's reliance on imported coal is anticipated to decrease below 15 per cent in the fiscal year 2024-25. In the fiscal year 2022-23, India imported 238 million metric tons (mt) of coal, with 20 million mt procured by imported coal-based power plants.
—PTI

Open access solar capacity at all-time high

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

India added a record 3.2 gigawatt of open access solar capacity during 2023, posting a 6.66 per cent rise supported by factors, including reduced module cost, according to a report.

In its latest report, US-based research firm Mercom Capital said the open access solar capacity addition was 3 gigawatt (GW) during 2022.

Solar power through open access is an arrangement where a power producer establishes a solar power plant to supply green energy to consumers.

It is the record high open access solar capacity addition in a calendar year. The cumulative installed solar capacity in the open access segment stood at 12.2 GW as of December 2023, the 'Mercom India Solar Open Access Market Report' said.

Open access solar is one of the bright spots in the country's solar market, attracting commercial enterprises and industrial units to shift towards solar and other clean energy sources, Raj Prabhu, CEO of Mercom Capital Group, said."The potential cost savings for businesses are hard to ignore, especially as solar costs continue to decrease while retail electricity prices rise. With a strong pipeline, the outlook is very promising for this market segment, and we anticipate strong growth in 2024," he said.Karnataka remained the top state for cumulative installations, accounting for 33.1 per cent of the country's installations, followed by Maharashtra (13.5 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (11.4 per cent).India had 13.9 GW of projects under development and in the pre-construction phase at the end of 2023.
—PTI

1st cargo of ONGC's crude oil reaches M'luru

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

The new crude oil from Krishna Godavari basin block KG-DWN-98/2 was brought to Mangalore by a ship named Swarna Sindhu, which was flagged off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 2 March.

"This sweet (low sulphur) indigenous crude is poised to be transformed into various fuels and petrochemicals at MRPL, Mangalore, contributing impactfully to the Athmanirbhar Bharath mission of the Government of India," it said.

The field is producing some 12,000-12,500 barrels of oil per day currently using a floating production and storage offloading (FPSO).

The oil is stored on the FPSO and once it reaches a critical level, it is transferred to a ship which carries it to a refinery for processing into fuels like petrol and diesel.

MRPL is a subsidiary of ONGC.

"At its peak, this production is expected to reach 45,000 barrels of oil per day of crude oil and 10 million standard cubic metres per day of natural gas," the statement said.

Speaking on the occasion, MRPL managing director M Shyamprasad Kamath said that this crude oil production results from ONGC Group's commitment and technical capabilities to contribute to the nation's energy self-dependence.

He said this crude oil would amount to a 7 per cent increase in India's crude oil and natural gas production potential at its peak.

"MRPL, a coastal refinery with three separate crude distillation units and essential supporting infrastructure, is well poised to process newer crudes. This has enabled it to have a diverse crude basket of 250 crude oil from around the globe, of which more than 100 have already been processed in the refinery complex at Mangaluru," it added.
—PTI

'THIS GOVT CARES'

Centre will take all measures to contain food prices: Goyal

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Centre will pull all stops to ensure prices of essential food items from onion to tomatoes to pulses do not spike particularly during the elections, Union Minister Piyush Goyal said as he cited the Modi government's track record of controlling rates within days of any temporary hike.

In an interview, Goyal, who is heading the food and consumer affairs ministry, asserted that the Modi government would continue to take measures to ensure that there is no stress on the household budget of "our Nari-Shakti".

Replying to a query regarding the government's strategy to ensure that there are no spikes in prices of food items when the general election kicks in, the minister said, "We are going to be on top of it. And I can assure the people of India that this government cares for the women of India."

He highlighted that the government has spent in the last few years about Rs 28,000 crore to the price stabilisation fund to support the effort to fight against food inflation.

"We will continue to be there with our sisters and mothers and make sure that we do not give stress...We are pro-actively on the job to make sure that we respect our Nari- Shakti and respect that they need to get a better household budget," Goyal asserted.

Election Commission is expected to announce the poll schedule soon and Lok Sabha elections are likely to be held in April-May.

The minister spoke at length about the government's various measures in the last few years to check prices of food items like onion, tomato, and pulses.

"When the whole world was facing severe inflation, particularly food inflation, and never seen before levels, some countries of the developed world were showing 40-year high inflation, India was a bright spot in the subject of inflation," he said.

During the UPA-era, Goyal said, the inflation was at high levels and food prices were going haywire. "If you look at the India story, even during the worst times, we were able to maintain our inflation at pretty much reasonable levels."

Union Minister Piyush Goyal spoke about government's various measures in the last years to check prices of food items
PHOTO: PTI

- In an interview, Goyal, who is heading the food and consumer affairs ministry, asserted that the Modi government would continue to take measures to ensure that there is no stress on the household budget of "our Nari-Shakti".

"We did not allow any product to see spikes beyond a point. If we saw any product going expensive, very often for reasons beyond our control, we acted immediately," he said.

Citing examples of price rise in tomatoes because of rains in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Karnataka and at about the same time, Goyal said the government immediately intervened and started procuring tomatoes from other regions to boost supplies across the country.

"We didn't allow the price to remain at those elevated levels beyond a few days. And as soon as the government intervention came in, prices came back to normal levels," he said.

The food and consumer minister added that similar efforts were taken when the prices of onion and pulses rose beyond reasonable levels.

"Even at nominal increases, the government now takes proactive measures," he said.

To provide relief to the common man, Goyal highlighted that the Centre has introduced Bharat Chana daal at Rs 60 per kg; Bharat Atta (wheat flour) at Rs 27.50 per kg and Bharat rice at Rs 29 per kg for sale in the open market.

These steps, he said, have brought "salutary effects" on prices.

"Inflation of food has been kept under control and our overall inflation is also very much within the RBI mandate," he said.

Referring to the government's latest estimate about lower onion output in 2023-24, he said, "I can assure you that the government will be proactive in its effort".

The government has 18,000 outlets of NCCF, NAFED, KendriyaBhandar and retail stores of state governments for sale of subsidised items like pulses, aata and rice.

That apart, he said, the government has also roped in e-commerce platforms for sale of these goods.
—PTI

India triumph in Test series 4-1: Ashwin shines in 100th Test

I am least insecure about what people feel about me experimenting: Ashwin

DHARAMSALA, 9 MARCH

Ravichandran Ashwin took a famous five-wicket haul in his 100th Test as India thrived on the impatience of England batters for an emphatic innings and 64-run victory in the final chapter of an action-packed five-match contest, handing the visitors their heaviest defeat in the 'Bazball' era.

Centuries from Shubman Gill and Rohit Sharma, followed by a five-wicket haul from Ravichandran Ashwin helped India to defeat England by an innings and 64 runs in the 5th Test in Dharamsala.

After bundling out England for 218, India posted 477 and took the lead by 259 runs. England got bundled out for 195 after Ashwin took five wickets. Apart from him, Jasprit Bumrah and Kuldeep Yadav also scalped two wickets each.

For England, Joe Root scored 84 runs while Jonny Bairstow scored 39. Earlier, Gill and Rohit had 110 and 103 runs respectively for India while Shoaib Bashir registered a five-wicket haul for England.

With this win, India ended the five-match series against England with a 4-1 scoreline.

Ravichandran Ashwin worked on different actions and speeds throughout the Test series against England and the master off-spinner said experimenting while shutting out external noises was integral for his success in the varied Indian conditions.

Ashwin, who played his 100th Test here, finished the five-match series as the top wicket-taker, bagging 26 wickets.

"Throughout the series, I have gone to different actions, speeds, and releases. India is different, each ground has a challenge. I am the least bit insecure about what people feel about me," Ashwin said at the post-match presentation. The 37-year-old said the mindset to add new dimensions to his bowling has worked well for him.

"If I am confident that I can try something, I don't hold back. I have kept my ears and eyes open to listen to good feedback.

"Unless I try, I will never be able to learn. I am not saying sticking to one method won't work. But thankfully experimenting and learning has helped me," said the Tamil Nadu man. Ashwin marked his spell on Saturday (5/77) and the one in England's second innings at Ranchi (5/51) as his best outings in the five-match series.

India 477 (Gill 110, Rohit 103, Padikkal 65, Sarfaraz 56, Bashir 5-173) beat England 218 and 195 (Root 84, Ashwin 5-77, Bumrah 2-38) by an innings and 64 runs. —*PTI*

R Ashwin **PHOTO: PTI**

Indian players celebrate with a trophy after winning the fifth Test cricket match over England, in Dharamsala on Saturday **PHOTO: PTI**

PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka beat Bangladesh by 28 runs to clinch series

SYLHET, 9 MARCH

Nuwan Thushara's five-wicket burst, including a hat-trick, after Kusal Mendis struck a 55-ball 86-handed Sri Lanka a 2-1 series win against Bangladesh in Sylhet on Saturday.Thushara blew away the Bangladesh top order with a hat-trick in his first over - the fourth of the innings. He became the sixth Sri Lankan to achieve the feat. Rishad Hossain and Taskin Ahmed, also Bangladesh's best bowlers on the day, provided some respite with the bat, but Sri Lanka had done enough damage in that initial phase to get to a comfortable win. Sri Lanka 174 for 7 (Mendis 86, Taskin 2-25, Rishad 2-35) beat Bangladesh 146 (Rishad 53, Taskin 31, Thushara 5-20, Hasaranga 2-32) by 28 runs.—*AP*

PHOTO: IANS

Hussamuddin loses to CWG champion Ireland's Jude

BUSTO ARSIZIO, 9 MARCH

World Championships bronze medallist Mohammed Hussamuddin made a disappointing return to competitive boxing after an injury lay-off, losing 0-4 to Ireland's Jude Gallagher in the men's 57kg clash at the 1st World Olympic Boxing Qualifier here.Hussamuddin had earlier received a first-round bye.Competing for the first time since the 2023 World Championships quarterfinals when he injured his left knee.—*AP*

PHOTO: PTI

Jhajharia elected unopposed as PCI president

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Two-time Paralympics gold medallist Devendra Jhajharia was on Saturday elected unopposed as the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) president, succeeding another celebrated para-athlete Deepa Malik.The 42-year-old javelin thrower, who had won a gold medal each in the 2004 Athens and 2016 Rio Paralympics in the F46 disability category, was the only candidate in the fray for the top post.All the new office bearers were elected unopposed. —*PTI*

Anderson: Eng record-breaker's run to 700 Test wickets

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

England veteran James Anderson added another glorious chapter to his remarkable tale of longevity when he became the first pacer and the third bowler overall to take 700 Test wickets here on Saturday.

Anderson reached the milestone in his 187th Test by removing India's Kuldeep Yadav, who caught behind on day three of the fifth Test here. He lured the Indian tail-ender into a drive and induced the outside edge.

The 41-year-old was on 699 scalps overnight after dismissing Shubman Gill with a beauty on day one.

The only other pacer to have taken 600 Test wickets or more is his former teammate Stuart Broad, who retired last year with 604 in the bag.

James Anderson became the first pacer and the third bowler overall to take 700 Test wickets **PHOTO: PTI**

India spin great Anil Kumble is fourth in the all-time list with 619 wickets in 132 Tests.

Having started when greats like Sachin Tendulkar, Ricky Ponting, and Brian Lara were in their prime, Anderson also asked tough questions to the immediate next generation including Virat Kohli, Steve Smith, and Kane Williamson.

And in this series, he challenged Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill, who were toddlers when he made his debut.

No one could have put it more aptly about his longevity than Sachin Tendulkar.

"The first time I saw Anderson play was in Australia in 2002, and his control over the ball looked special. Nasser Hussain spoke very highly of him back then and today, I am sure, he would say, "Maine bola tha" — that he had called it so early," Tendulkar wrote on his official 'X' handle. —*PTI*

I know what it's like to lose to 'B' Team: Paine

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Tim Paine loves watching bitter rivals England lose any series but the former Australia captain knows what it is like to be beaten by an Indian 'B' team in Test cricket.

No one knows what it feels like to lose to a second-string Indian side better than Paine, who was the Australian captain during the 2020-21 Border-Gavaskar Trophy, where India claimed a famous 2-1 series win away from home.

Devoid of then captain Virat Kohli, who flew back home after the first Test, Rohit Sharma, who was ruled out of the first two games, pacers Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav who were out with injuries, and no Ravichandran Ashwin and Jasprit Bumrah, who were unavailable for the final Test in Gabba, Ajinkya Rahane led a pack of spirited youngsters to hand India a memorable series victory.

Tim Paine **PHOTO: AFP**

"I know what it's like to be beaten by an Indian B team. Unfortunately, it happened to us on our home soil.

"But yes, some huge names out for India, which should have certainly helped the English," said speaking to another former Australia captain Brad Haddin on the 'Around the Wicket' podcast. —*PTI*

PLAY TESTS, EARN MORE: BCCI TRIPLES MATCH FEE

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Walking the talk about giving the highest priority to Test cricket, the BCCI has decided to increase the match fee to up to Rs 45 lakh from the existing Rs 15 lakh for all those who play at least seven long-form games per season, Board secretary Jay Shah announced on Saturday.A Test player, who gets to appear in a possible 10 Tests in a season will be richer by a whopping Rs 4.50 crore, apart from the assured retainer fee that he gets for having an annual central contract.The incentives will be retrospective and will factor in players who were part of Test cricket during the 2022-23 season.The decision was taken after some players like Ishan Kishan, Shreyas Iyer, and Deepak Chahar snubbed Ranji Trophy cricket to continue training with their IPL teams despite the Board's diktat to prioritize red-ball cricket.Currently, an Indian Test cricketer, who is picked in the playing XI gets Rs 15 lakh while the reserves get Rs 7.5 lakh. —*PTI*

Kaur powers MI to 7-wicket win over GG

NEW DELHI, 9 MARCH

Skipper Harmanpreet Kaur hammered a brutal 95 not out (48 balls, 10x4s, 5x6s) as Mumbai Indians came back roaring in their Women's Premier League game to defeat Gujarat Giants by seven wickets here on Saturday.

Chasing 191 to win, Mumbai Indians finished at 191/3 in 19.5 overs.

Mumbai Indians were given a strong start by wicketkeeper-batter Yastika Bhatia, who clobbered eight fours and a six to make 49 from 36 balls.

Earlier, Gujarat Giants posted 190 for 7 with skipper Beth Mooney leading the way with a fine 66 off 35 balls with eight fours and three sixes.

But it was Dayalan Hemalatha who struck a belligerent 74 off only 40 balls with nine fours and two sixes to emerge as the top scorer. Mooney and Hemalatha put on 121 runs for the second wicket to set the platform for a big total, from only 62 balls.

Brief scores: Gujarat Giants 190/7 in 20 overs (Beth Mooney 66, Dayalan Hemalatha 74; Saika Ishaque 2/31) lost to Mumbai Indians 191/3 in 19.5 overs (Yastika Bhatia 49, Harmanpreet Kaur 95*; Tanuja Kanwar 1/21) by 7 wickets. —*PTI*

Skipper Harmanpreet Kaur **PHOTO:PTI**

Manchester United's Marcus Rashford, 2nd from right, scores his side's second goal with a penalty **PHOTO: AFP**

Alcaraz rallies to subdue Arnaldi in Indian Wells

INDIAN WELLS, 8 MARCH

World number two Carlos Alcaraz got off to a stuttering start in his Indian Wells Masters title defense on Friday but turned the tables to beat Matteo Arnaldi 6-7 (5/7), 6-0, 6-1.

The second-round success served as a welcome fitness test for the 20-year-old Spaniard, who rolled his ankle a fortnight ago in Rio and retired from his first-round match there.

Alcaraz gathered his forces after dropping the opening set against Arnaldi, cutting his unforced error count from 23 in the first set to a mere eight for the remainder of the contest.

Carlos Alcaraz **PHOTO: AFP**

The reigning Wimbledon champion lost just one more game as he came through in two and a quarter hours, concluding with 22 winners.Alcaraz said his ankle felt better than expected. —*AP*

Latham and Henry lead NZ's fightback in tense battle

CHRISTCHURCH, 9 MARCH

Matt Henry claimed a seven-wicket haul to restrict Australia before Tom Latham and Kane Williamson struck half-centuries to continue New Zealand's stirring fightback in the second Test at Hagley Oval.But Williamson fell late on day two for 51 after succumbing to the first ball of a new spell from Pat Cummins, dragging a delivery onto his stumps that had deceptively decked back. Just before stumps, Latham edged a delivery from Josh Hazlewood that shaped away only for wicketkeeper Alex Carey to spill a chance after diving low down in front of Khawaja at first slip. New Zealand 162 and 134 for 2 (Latham 65*, Ravindra 11*) trail Australia 256 (Labuschagne 90, Henry 7-67) by 51 runs

Fernandes and Rashford convert penalties in Man United's 2-0 win

MADRID, 9 MARCH

Alejandro Garnacho was at the heart of Manchester United's Premier League win over Everton on Saturday, winning the penalties Bruno Fernandes and Marcus Rashford converted in a 2-0 victory.

Erik ten Hag's side stuttered on Saturday lunchtime but managed to end a run of back-to-back Premier League defeats and keep their Champions League qualification quest alive.

United struggled for large periods against out-of-form Everton, who had 23 shots but paid the price for twice shooting themselves in the foot in the first half.

James Tarkowski clumsily brought down Garnacho after a bright Toffees start, with captain Fernandes converting the resulting spot-kick in front of the Stretford End.

Sean Dyche's men settled and continued to threaten, only to be punished by a Rashford penalty after Ben Godfrey fouled lively Argentina international Garnacho.United continued to offer Everton a way back into the match but they failed to capitalise - something you would not expect Liverpool to struggle with in next weekend's FA Cup quarter-final.

The Toffees began this topsy-turvy encounter on top, but the sleepy hosts still managed a couple of efforts before taking a 12th-minute lead at Old Trafford.Tarkowski caught Garnacho as he cut back and, after a swift VAR check, Fernandes' hit a spot-kick just out of Jordan Pickford's reach into the bottom right-hand corner. Dwight McNeil volleyed narrowly wide as Everton looked to put that disappointment behind them, with United academy graduate James Garner testing Andre Onana before Amadou Onana mishit the follow-up. McNeil lasered across the face of the goal as Everton continued to prove a nuisance, although that effort came shortly after Pickford stopped Fernandes from scoring his second. —*AP*

SERIE A

Napoli held by Torino ahead of Barcelona decider

LONDON, 9 MARCH

Napoli faced a setback as they were held to a 1-1 draw by Torino at home in Serie A on Friday. The draw comes just before their crucial Champions League match against Barcelona. Torino's Antonio Sanabria scored an impressive acrobatic overhead kick in the 64th minute to equalize after Khvicha Kvaratskhelia had put Napoli ahead.

This draw has hindered Napoli's hopes of securing European football next season, as they currently sit in seventh place in the Serie A standings. With this result, they are now two points behind Atalanta, who occupy the Europa Conference League spot. Napoli will have a tough challenge ahead as they face Juventus on Sunday.

Looking at the bigger picture, Napoli are trailing by seven points behind the teams in the Champions League positions. The Serie A title race seems to be out of reach for Napoli, as Inter Milan, who are leading the table, are 15 points ahead of them. Napoli will need to quickly shift their focus to the upcoming Champions League fixture against Barcelona in Catalonia. The first leg ended in a 1-1 draw, so everything is still to play for in the second leg with a spot in the quarter-finals at stake.

In light of these recent developments, Napoli will have to regroup and come back stronger in both domestic and European competitions to achieve their season objectives. The matches ahead will test their resilience and determination as they aim to finish the season on a high note. —*AP*

Napoli played a 1-1 draw against Torino **PHOTO: AFP**

- Napoli faced a setback as they were held to a 1-1 draw by Torino at home in Serie A on Friday. The draw comes just before their crucial Champions League match against Barcelona.